

# The State of the Art in Foreign Policy Analysis: An Introduction

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## Abstract

This introductory article outlines the purpose and scope of a special issue dedicated to assessing the current state of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA). We highlight FPA's evolution as a subfield within International Relations, particularly emphasizing its distinctive focus on agency and the interplay between domestic and international factors in shaping foreign policy. We also introduce the special issue's contributions to the literature from emerging and established scholars in exploring theoretical, methodological, and empirical innovations in FPA. We conclude that by embracing methodological pluralism and diverse units of analysis, the special issue showcases how FPA continues to enrich our understanding of international politics while providing ideas for promising directions for future research.

**Keywords:** Foreign Policy Analysis, leadership analysis, role theory, methodological pluralism, agency and structure

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## Introduction

Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) has developed a rich and multifaceted academic tradition over the years and has become a well-established subfield in International Relations (IR). As the field of IR experienced a domestic turn (Kaarbo 2015), the thrust and scope of the FPA became even more visible and vital to understanding the variation in actions of international actors, even when experiencing similar types of structural constraints. Leaders, states, and non-state actors navigate different sets of emerging domestic and systemic pressures when these agents adopt different patterns of behavior to achieve specific foreign policy goals in bilateral, regional, and global settings. The analytical benefit of FPA is in its inherent focus on agency. As such, FPA is uniquely positioned to provide compelling explanations for international phenomena using domestic and international variables. The emphasis on agency and the ability to bridge *the domestic* and *the international* has produced relevant insights, and the theoretical and

methodological advances in FPA have led to a greater understanding of state and non-state actors worldwide.

Yet, FPA is not homogenous, either theoretically or methodologically. The existing plurality in FPA approaches enriches the quest to find answers to empirical problems by relying on different research traditions and theoretical perspectives. This special issue is an effort to review the “state of the art” in FPA and offers theoretical and methodological insights to expand the reach and impact of FPA through different theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions by scholars in different stages of their academic careers. In doing this, we take stock of past developments in the field, review the current and exciting work in different research programs, and look to the future to help the next generation of FPA scholars to advance the field theoretically and methodologically by developing research questions and thinking more deeply about rigor and the most exciting and relevant topics.

This special issue offers a comprehensive exploration of the current FPA literature, showcasing a wide range of thematic and methodological advancements and case studies using different units of analysis. Our contributing authors bring fresh theoretical insights and methodological innovations to the field, sometimes revisiting established frameworks and introducing novel perspectives. The articles also delve into diverse case studies from around the world and, in many cases, challenge traditional state-centric views by applying established methodological tools in FPA in regions where the state is treated as a “black box” in many currently available FPA research (Thiers 2025). Leadership studies, a cornerstone of FPA, receive significant attention in this special issue, particularly through the exploration of Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA) and Operational Code Analysis (OpCode), two approaches pivotal to understanding agency in foreign policy (Walker, Schafer, and Lambert 2025; Canbolat 2025). Some of the contributions included in this special issue focus on methodological innovations that address contemporary foreign policy issues. These include computational approaches (Ergurum 2025), the evolving cyber landscape (Lorci and Li 2025), and the influence of public opinion on foreign policy (Tatlı and Tavlı 2025). These studies enrich the FPA field by reflecting on its established foundations and providing a glimpse into its future directions.

Below, we locate this special issue within the existing literature, discuss the analytical benefits of FPA from a theoretically and methodologically plural approach, and briefly introduce the articles that appear in the later pages.

## **The Origins and Consolidation of FPA**

FPA started to delimit its boundaries with contributions of its founding scholars, including but not limited to Richard Snyder, Harold and Margaret Sprout, James Rosenau, Alexander George, and Ole Holsti. These scholars primarily questioned the state-centric approach to FPA and highlighted the role individuals played as key agents during the decision-making of the state’s foreign policy. They argued that FPA scholars’ focus should be on the leaders (i.e., foreign policymakers) as the unit of analysis in foreign policy analysis, as their preferences

and how they perceive events are essential to understanding foreign policymaking and the behavior of international actors (Snyder et al. 1954).

The second generation of FPA scholars advanced the concept of agency by focusing more deeply on the role of individuals in shaping foreign policy. Some of the research that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s include small group dynamics (e.g., Janis 1972), leadership studies and foreign policy analysis such as LTA and OpCode (e.g., Walker 1977; Hermann 1980), role theory (e.g., Holsti 1970), bureaucracies (e.g., Allison 1971; Halperin 1974), and comparative foreign policy analysis (McGowan and Shapiro 1973). Brecher (1972) noted that the way leaders filter their “operational environment,” which consists of external systems - global, subordinate, subordinate other, bilateral, dominant bilateral system - and internal factors - economic capability, military capability, political structure, interest groups, competition within the elite - has considerable influence on foreign policy decisions. Similarly, research done by Sprout and Sprout (1956) was important in uncovering how individuals’ or groups’ understanding of the “reality” influences the foreign policymaking process and decision outcomes, owing to their emphasis on the importance of the foreign policymaking context. As Kegley and Hermann (1995: 4) put it, these FPA scholars endeavored to provide “a compelling explanation [of foreign policy]” that understood that the scholarship “cannot treat the decider exogenously” (quoted in Hudson 2005: 10).

The advances made by the second generation of FPA scholars are still prevalent in today’s literature and have been further developed and refined by subsequent generations of scholars (e.g., Hocking 1994; Lindsay 1994; Hart et al. 1997; Kaarbo 1997; 1998; Walker et al. 1998; Neack 2003; Dyson 2006; Schafer and Crichlow 2010; Thies 2010; Harnisch 2011; Cantir and Kaarbo 2012; Beasley et al. 2012; Wehner and Thies 2014; Cuhadar et al. 2017; Brummer et al. 2020; Özdamar and Canbolat 2023; Breuning 2024).

The global visibility and contributions of the FPA research to the general study of IR crystallized with the launching of the journal “Foreign Policy Analysis” under the institutional umbrella of the International Studies Association (ISA). In the opening article of the journal, Valerie Hudson (2005) reaffirmed the understanding of foreign policy analysis as having “... an actor-specific focus, based upon the argument that all that occurs between nations and across nations is grounded in human decision-makers acting singly or in groups.” In this regard, FPA opens the “black box” of the state and seeks to study not only states’ foreign policies, focusing primarily on a set of actors that are located domestically and internationally.

In their article, Kaarbo and Thies (2024) highlight the emergence of a third generation of FPA scholars who have built upon the above-mentioned foundational principles of the second generation (also see Neack et al. 1995). These scholars continue to conduct multifaceted, multidimensional, and theoretically grounded research while emphasizing sensitivity to contextual factors. Central to this pursuit of a more theoretically innovative, multidimensional, and context-aware understanding of foreign policy is the embrace of methodological plurality, which helps facilitate scholarly progress and the accumulation of knowledge (see Mello and Ostermann 2023).

Today, few will dispute the added value FPA has brought to the study of IR, as the FPA literature has helped this field to fine-tune some of its approaches by focusing on agent-focused explanations and understanding developments around the world and at the global level (Kaarbo and Thies 2024). One of the main contributions of FPA has been its continuous challenge to the reification of structures that are more dominant in the IR field. While this special issue cannot do justice to the full spectrum of topics, approaches, and methodologies in the FPA literature, we hope that it provides a significant contribution to refining theoretical developments further, setting up research agendas, and carrying on in the provision of methodological innovations in this subfield.

Over the past 15 to 20 years, research in FPA has increasingly centered, among a few others, on role conceptions, the personality traits and beliefs of leaders from a decision-making perspective, and integrating role theory with neoclassical realism. Notable advancements have also emerged at the intersection of leadership studies, neoclassical realism, and ontological security. More recently, there has been a growing interest in the role of emotions, populism, and other political ideologies, and the advancements in cybersecurity play a role in foreign policy. Additionally, the application of computational models has emerged as a dynamic area of inquiry. Together, these developments open promising pathways for research, offering substantial opportunities to expand knowledge in the field.

The following section offers a concise overview of the evolution of these research areas and situates the contributions in this special issue within that broader scholarly context.

## **Theoretical and Methodological Developments in FPA**

### **Neoclassical Realism**

Neoclassical Realism (NCR) is an IR theoretical approach that bridges Structural Realism's emphasis on systemic constraints with the consideration of domestic-level factors and individual decision-making (Ripsman et.al. 2016). Gideon Rose (1998), who coined the term, argues that while the international system's anarchic structure and distribution of power shape state behavior, the influence of domestic politics, state capacity, and leaders' perceptions play critical roles in translating systemic pressures into foreign policy outcomes. In this sense, there is a close affinity between NCR and FPA, but with a theoretically important distinction. Whereas FPA does not exclude the importance of external factors (Kaarbo and Thies 2024) in its quest to unpack the processes that lead to states' actions, its primary focus on how foreign policymakers make sense of and interpret external pressures and evolving systemic contexts is distinctive in opposition to the NCR's prioritization of external and systemic factors as independent variables to explain the behavior of the state internationally. This difference between FPA and NCR is not a matter of nuance and semantic differentiation. It instead draws our attention to their different focus on the key force for the state's action and behavior. While most FPA accounts rely on domestic elements as explanatory factors, NCRs treat the domestic as intervening variables (Wivel 2024). However, the key contribution of NCR is that this

approach problematizes the distinction between international and foreign policy inherent in Classical Realism and Structural Realism. Schweller (2004), for example, explores how domestic political struggles and regime survival shape foreign policy responses to systemic challenges.

In his review of the literature, Wivel (2024: 109) suggests that NCR can be understood as an analytical template for analyzing foreign policy, where the external or structural forces are only the starting point to find plausible explanations for foreign policy choices and behavior, making them “independent or permissive causes of foreign policy.” In other words, NCR and FPA scholars share the viewpoint that, in contrast to those scholars who rely on ontological assumptions of material power and systemic pressures on state action, different states react differently to the same pressures, adopting a multilevel and multifactor approach that is similar to FPA.

Recent research using the NCR approach has indeed been applied to explain a wide range of foreign policy behaviors, including the response of the European states to the war in Ukraine (Martill and Sus 2024) examining interaction between systemic forces and a host of unit-level attributes, including military capabilities and geopolitical position, ideas and identities, and domestic politics, foreign policies of revisionist powers like China (Schweller 2018) examining how domestic politics mediate responses to systemic pressures, and regional power dynamics, particularly in the Middle East (Kubicek 2022) where state capacity and elite competition significantly influence foreign policy.

In an upcoming piece in the *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Haluk Doğan (2025) criticizes the static approach of NCR in his article “The Nexus of Power, Culture, and Elite Interactions: A Neoclassical Realist Framework for Foreign Policy Analysis”. Originally planned to be included in this special issue, Doğan’s research shows how the interplay of systemic and domestic variables has developed a fruitful research agenda on NCR that captures overall trends and foreign policy trajectories of states. He argues that while the NCR approach has provided rich accounts and explanations of foreign policy, there is a lack of understanding on variation in state actions and the reasons as to why states tend to adjust their strategies toward different actors when showing a relatively stable power distribution and strategic culture. In his contribution, Doğan moves the NCR research forward by emphasizing the role of systemic structures and strategic culture in shaping states’ overarching behavioral patterns. He adds that the inclusion of elite interactions contributes nuance by influencing the timing, form, and content of foreign policy behavior. He notes that when researchers consider and trace elite interactions, the NCR framework becomes dynamic and able to capture variation.

## National Role Conceptions

Role Theory has been a central framework in studying FPA. Kalevi Holsti’s seminal contribution in 1970 introduced the concept of roles to foreign policy, focusing on the self-conception of roles through the study of leaders’ and decision-makers’ references to the role of the state, known as National Role Conceptions (NRCs). This approach was further developed during

the 1980s and 1990s and incorporated a broader range of case studies and emphasized the interplay between structure and state-level analysis (e.g., Wish 1980; Jonnson and Westerlund 1982; Walker 1987; Shih 1988; Le Pestre 1997).

The analytical benefit of applying NRCs in the study of foreign policy received new impetus in the early 2010s (Thies 2010; Harnisch 2011; Breuning 2011; McCourt 2012; Cantir and Kaarbo 2012; Wehner and Thies 2014; Wehner 2015; Wehner and Thies 2021) and continues to draw interest from FPA scholars from around the world. During this revival phase, FPA scholars have not only revisited the main contributions of the early NRC research but also adopted a relational dimension to the approach, arguing that any role needs a counterrole. NRCs are patterns of behavior deemed appropriate for an actor, defining the type of international actor it aspires to be within a given social context (Thies 2010; Harnisch 2011; Thies and Breuning 2012). A role conception encompasses the *ego* (self), definition of a situation, and the set of expectations attributed to the *alter* (other). Roles are understood as both properties of agents and structures (Wehner and Thies 2014). Role enactment refers to an actor's actual foreign policy behavior (Breuning 2024), while a role-set represents the collection of roles an international actor holds when engaging with the international system (Aggestam 2006).

One of the benefits of the NRC approach is its organizational flexibility, allowing roles to span different levels of analysis, including the individual, state, and international levels. Role theory is also rich in describing the social reality of foreign policy and can adapt premises from other theories into its theoretical scope. Similarly, the conceptual richness of the role theory can be incorporated into other theoretical frames (Walker 1987; Thies 2010).

A main contribution the FPA scholars have made to the role theory since the 2010s has been integrating the notion of domestic role contestation (see Cantir and Kaarbo 2012; 2016; Wehner and Thies 2014) into the NRC research. These scholars have expanded the research in this area by focusing on how and under what conditions states play multiple roles on the world stage (Thies 2010; Breuning 2011; 2017) and distinguished among master and auxiliary (i.e., Thies 2012; Wehner 2015) and contested (i.e., Cantir and Kaarbo 2012; 2016) roles to develop a framework that theorizes the conditions under which role dissonance or role crisis must be addressed (Breuning and Pechenina 2020). Today, the NRC approach is applied to different set of empirical realities, and some of the most salient issues in role theory research revolve around the examination of master and auxiliary roles (Thies 2012; Wehner 2015; Guimaraes 2020), role socialization (Thies 2013; Thies and Niemann 2017), role contestation (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012; Wehner and Thies 2014), role dissonance (Breuning and Pechenina 2020), and role expectations and altercasting (Wehner 2015; Oppermann 2024).

Despite, and maybe because of, the significant progress in the past 15 years, there are new areas in which the role approach can be of analytical utility. Breuning (2024) outlines some of these, such as the use of role theory in the study of international organizations and non-state actors and the examination of the so-called “pre-states.” She also highlights the plurality of methodologies used by role theorists and the increasing attention scholars pay to the more systematic and rigorous methodologies used in this area of research.



In this special issue, Süleyman Altıparmak and Cameron Thies (2025) contribute to the growing literature on NRCs by analyzing the concept of “role strain” to explore the complexities of foreign policy decision-making. Using the Carter Doctrine as a case study, the authors investigate United States (US) foreign policy during the Carter administration, focusing on the tensions between advancing liberal internationalism and addressing domestic priorities. Their analysis sheds light on the challenges of balancing competing role expectations in foreign policy. Additionally, they find that the role strain inherent in the Carter Doctrine not only shaped US-Soviet relations but also had significant domestic and international repercussions for US politics.

Çağla Kılıç’s (2025) contribution, “A Different Approach on Analyzing Countries’ Grand Strategies: China and the US”, shows the analytical benefits of using role theory premises in the study of grand strategies of China and the US. This piece focuses on the intensity and significance of a particular grand strategy, its transformative and stabilizing force, and what makes it a grand strategy instead of a set of short-term foreign policy actions. Kılıç’s findings show that China is more concerned with and prioritizes economic development. Furthermore, contrary to conventional wisdom, China has adopted a liberal internationalist policy on the global level. China’s threat perceptions are driven by different actors and their impact in ways that can hamper China’s economic progress. Unlike China, the US grand strategy is more conventional and focuses on promoting a national security strategy underpinned by democracy promotion and a priority for regional and international stability. Yet, the US still pursues economic interests in its grand strategy, which is less salient than China’s. While Kılıç’s article relies on a role theory approach, it also talks directly to the Neoclassical Realist literature as it combines systemic and agent factors when studying the grand strategy of China and the US.

## Ontological Security

Ontological security (OS) or “the security of being” has been predominantly used in IR. OS seeks to understand why actors seek security for reasons different from material reasons. In his review of the OS literature, Steele (2024) suggests that while the OS research has contributed to IR, it is still in its infant stages in FPA. One criticism OS receives is related to its predominant analytical focus on the state (Von Essen and Danielson 2023) and the prioritization of the state as its primary unit of analysis (i.e., see Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008).

Despite this criticism, much FPA research relies on the OS approach to prioritize the state (see Lupovici 2012; Oppermann and Hensel 2019). In their examination of the Israeli-German special relationship, Oppermann and Hensel (2019) show how this particular relationship has developed over time and provided a stable sense of being to both actors. This is very much in line with earlier studies like Mitzen’s (2006), which argue that states seek consistent relationships - even adversarial ones at times - to maintain identity coherence. In contrast, in analyzing ontological dissonance, Lupovici (2012) uses the case of Israel’s conflicting self-identity, highlighting how unresolved historical trauma can shape foreign policy through the lens of identity and memory (Subotić 2016).

Bolton's (2021) call for FPA scholars to delve deeper into how foreign policymakers manipulate the need for OS is likely to continue to inspire new research at the intersection of leadership studies, domestic actors, and state-level strategies for achieving OS at the state level. This includes examining how leaders and various domestic actors contest and shape narratives to maintain a sense of continuity and security, enhancing OS research and adding significantly to FPA. Indeed, Subotić (2016) illustrated this dynamic by analyzing Serbia's foreign policy shifts, showing how Serbia managed to preserve a sense of OS during times of change through leaders' narratives emphasizing biographical continuity. Similarly, recent research employing the OS framework has explored individual and domestic dimensions in cases such as Brexit (e.g., Browning 2019) and the role of populist leaders like Donald Trump (e.g., Homolar and Scholz 2019; Löffmann 2022). These studies highlight the importance of narratives in maintaining ontological security during political transitions and upheavals.

These studies and others bring IR and FPA together through the OS approach, but the distinction between the focus on the state in OS research and the agency in FPA remains strong. Steele (2024) detects some of the overlaps between OS in IR and FPA and suggests a road map to maximize these synergies while reconciling their differences. According to him, future research focusing on bureaucratic politics and more historically-based accounts of state action from a cognitive perspective (i.e., analogy and metaphors) might lead to a fruitful dialogue between OS and FPA.

In this special issue, Tatlı and Tavlı (2025) question how FPA has analytically treated public opinion as this field of study overlooks the diversity within the category public opinion, prioritizes elite conceptualizations of the public at the expense of the ordinary voices, and lacks consistent data collection process that reflect such diversity of voices within the so-called public. This piece introduces a Vernacular Approach to foreign policy. This approach that has been used in security studies can illuminate the mentioned shortcomings of the public by reflecting on the importance of ordinary individuals for security narratives, on the tensions and gap elites and ordinary individuals as a disruptive context and on the potential to develop an inclusive and grassroots policy process in the foreign policy field. The Vernacular approach has the potential to contribute to a better understanding of the discourses representing public voices in foreign policy. This paper also discusses methodological issues and literature within the stream of OS.

## Emotions in Foreign Policy

In recent years, there has been a growing focus on how emotions shape foreign policy decisions, adding another challenging perspective to the traditional rationalist view that focuses on the role of material interests and strategic calculations in driving policymaking (Mercer 2005). While early FPA scholars like Robert Jervis and Herbert Simon acknowledged the role of emotions in foreign policy, more recent research has become more rigorous theoretically and methodologically and demonstrated how emotional factors (e.g., the need for validation or fear of loss) are often central to decision-making.



The “emotional turn” in the literature focused on exploring the influence of emotions across key paradigms. For instance, Freyberg-Inan (2006) emphasizes “fear” as an important factor in Realist interpretations of the international system, while D’Aoust (2014) argues that mutual sympathy is vital to neoliberal notions of social capital. As Clément and Sangar (2018) note in their edited volume, while there is broad agreement among researchers that emotions are historically, culturally, and socially shaped, there is less consensus on how emotional shifts occur. Questions like why certain emotions gain prominence in specific political contexts and how they become collectively shared or institutionalized (Bleiker and Hutchison 2014; Crawford 2014) are yet to be answered. Mercer (2014) aptly captured this challenge during the first years of the so-called “emotional turn” in IR, noting that emotions are difficult to define, measure, and separate from other factors.

Additionally, researchers like Crawford (2000) and Ross (2006) began to systematically study the impact of emotions, building a richer understanding of their role in both FPA and broader IR. Specifically, studies have examined how foreign policymakers interpret threats and opportunities and how emotions influence these perceptions, especially under conditions of uncertainty (Gurkan 2024). Psychological and cognitive models have shown the impact of biases like confirmation bias, availability heuristics, and anchoring effects in shaping foreign policy decisions. Emotions such as anxiety and anger can either sharpen or impair rational decision-making by altering how leaders process information (Manners 2024; Thiers 2024). For example, emotions like fear and anger significantly influenced US policies during George W. Bush’s presidency, particularly in the War on Terror (Wayne 2023). In recent years, attention has also shifted toward examining emotions in specific contexts, such as their relationship with violent conflict, norms, and governance (i.e., Gustafson and Hall 2021).

Emotions also play a decisive role in shaping public opinion on foreign policy, primarily through social media (Pamment 2014). Nussbaum (2001), for example, argues that emotions like compassion and indignation are often mobilized to justify humanitarian interventions. Similarly, Baum and Potter (2008) show how emotionally charged media framing can significantly sway public support for military actions.

The study of emotions has most recently engaged with methodological debates and self-reflections to enrich this new theoretical development. Yet, scholars working on emotions face some methodological challenges. One challenge is how generalizable findings are when studying emotions in a particular context and whether these findings can be applied to a different contextual situation. Second, the toolsets to study emotions need further elaboration, as the disciplines of IR and FPA developed methodologies and methods before emotions came into these fields, which may not always be applicable to this new development. Studying emotions can benefit from a dialogue with disciplines that have made more progress on studying emotions, such as psychology and psychoanalysis. These dialogues can also question how existing methods like ethnographic and other set of qualitative studies in foreign policy can be used to maximize the research process when focusing on emotions as a subject of inquiry. While the study of emotions and the methodological choices made follow the type of research questions posed, these methodological choices should also reflect what we mean by

emotion, i.e., basic emotion, appraisals, or as socially constructed. Further, it is important to make clear whose emotions are being studied and how they are being studied. Emotions can be seen as something experienced by states as international actors or by the group of individuals directing the foreign policy of a state, which focuses on issues of levels of analysis (Clément and Sangar 2017; Van Rythoven and Sucharov 2020).

In this special issue, the article “Emotion Norms and International Securitization in FPA: The Official Russian Narratives on the Ukrainian-Russian War” by Kösen and Gezen (2025) explores how emotions, particularly emotion norms, shape the construction of security narratives in international diplomacy. By analyzing the speeches of Russia’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations (UN), Vasily Nebenzya, the authors highlight how emotion norms - socially accepted standards for emotional expression - are strategically employed to influence international audiences and legitimize Russia’s securitizing moves, especially concerning the Ukraine-Russia conflict. Unlike traditional approaches in securitization theory that emphasize domestic audiences, this study brings attention to the international stage, particularly the UN, as a key platform for projecting emotionalized security narratives. Through a qualitative discourse analysis of 45 speeches by Nebenzya, the study identifies recurring themes such as NATO’s portrayal as an existential threat, the West’s alleged hypocrisy, and the rise of Russophobia. Kösen and Gezen argue that these narratives are infused with emotional appeals - fear, anger, moral outrage - and framed using historical analogies and victimhood rhetoric. By casting Russia as a responsible actor and victim of Western aggression, and Ukraine as a puppet state used for geopolitical leverage, the speeches aim to establish emotion norms that guide how international audiences perceive the legitimacy of Russia’s actions. The study also reveals that emotion norms are not merely byproducts of securitization but are instrumental in shaping which actors are considered moral or immoral within the international community.

## Leaders in Foreign Policy Analysis

Leaders shape foreign policy in many ways, and frameworks like OpCode, LTA, and other cognitive models like Prospect Theory and Poliheuristic Theory provide ways to understand their influence. In fact, the role of leaders in FPA continues to be an essential area of study, focusing on how individual traits, beliefs, decision-making styles, and feelings shape a country’s foreign policy.

OpCode is a foundational framework for understanding leaders’ belief systems and how these influence foreign policy decisions. OpCode, which was first introduced by Nathan Leites (1951) and later refined by Alexander George (1969), focuses on two types of beliefs: philosophical (how leaders view the nature of politics and conflict) and instrumental (the strategies they prefer to achieve their goals). These belief systems are critical in shaping leaders’ approaches to conflict and cooperation in international politics. In the 1980s and 1990s, Stephen Walker (1987; 1990) advanced the OpCode research by bringing more quantitative methods to the analysis, thereby making it possible to compare belief systems across leaders systematically. For example, scholars were able to find that leaders with conflict-driven operational codes, such as George W. Bush after 9/11, often favor aggressive,

unilateral policies. On the other hand, leaders with more cooperative codes tend to pursue reconciliatory strategies.

LTA is one of the most prominent approaches to studying political leaders. This framework was developed by Margaret Hermann (1980) and integrates her decades of research on the role of personality characteristics in foreign policy. In this approach, personality is conceptualized as a combination of seven traits: belief in an ability to control events, conceptual complexity, need for power, distrust of others, ingroup bias, self-confidence, and task orientation. LTA has been used to study the personalities of many leaders, including US presidents, British Prime Ministers, sub-Saharan African leaders, Iranian leaders, Soviet Politburo members, and heads of international organizations such as the European Union and the United Nations (Hermann 1984; 1987; Mastors 2000; Preston 2001; Taysi and Preston 2001; Kille and Scully 2003; Dyson 2006).

According to Hermann et al. (2001), the seven traits combine in particular ways to produce specific behaviors by leaders. For example, leaders who have a high belief in their ability to control events and a high need for power are expected to challenge constraints; leaders low in need for power and/or who do not believe they can control events are expected to respect constraints. Conceptual complexity and self-confidence are related to and predict leaders' openness to information. Leaders with high scores on both traits and leaders with high complexity and low self-confidence are expected to be open to information. In contrast, leaders with low scores on both traits and leaders with high self-confidence and low complexity are expected to be closed to information. These two composite traits combine with a leader's motivation for leading to produce a typology of eight different leadership styles, which Hermann (2003: 181) argues, provide a profile of how "leaders relate to those around them and how they structure interactions and the norms, rules, and principles they use to guide such interactions."

The LTA framework has been widely applied, from authoritarian figures like Irē Saddam Hussein to democratic leaders like Angela Merkel. Research shows that leaders with high conceptual complexity are more likely to consider diverse perspectives and adopt multilateral approaches. In contrast, those with low complexity, such as Adolf Hitler, are prone to rigid, aggressive strategies. Traits like distrust and a high need for power often correlate with authoritarian tendencies and riskier decision-making. These insights make LTA a valuable tool for predicting leaders' behaviors in both domestic and international contexts. An interesting application of the LTA in recent years has led to advancing the study of the nexus of populism and foreign policy (Thiers and Wehner 2022). By focusing on the political personality profiles of two populist leaders characterized as antiplural, Hugo Chávez and Donald Trump, Thiers and Wehner (2022) empirically examined the growing role of populism in world politics. The authors found that populist leaders' personalities were the key drivers of their noncooperative and conflict-inducing behavior in foreign policy.

Beyond OpCode and LTA, cognitive and psychological models provide a deeper understanding of the mental processes that shape leaders' decisions, particularly under uncertainty or stress. We can refer to two prominent theories: (1) Prospect Theory, developed

by Kahneman and Tversky (1979), explains how leaders frame decisions based on potential gains or losses. Leaders are generally risk-averse when pursuing gains but more willing to take risks to avoid losses, and (2) Poliheuristic Theory, developed by Alex Mintz (2004) and his students, highlights how leaders simplify complex decisions by eliminating options that fail to meet critical political or personal criteria before engaging in detailed analysis. This theory emphasizes that leaders often prioritize domestic political considerations over strategic or economic factors.

Recent scholarship on the role leaders play in foreign policy decision-making has increasingly emphasized the role of emotions in shaping leaders' foreign policy decisions. Emotions such as pride, fear, and anger affect how leaders interpret situations and respond to crises. Case studies reveal how emotions drive foreign policy actions. For instance, Vladimir Putin's use of nationalism and emotional appeals played a key role in justifying the annexation of Crimea (Edinger 2023).

The present special issue engages with different dimensions of leaders in foreign policy. The piece by Walker, Schafer, and Lambert (2025) combines binary role theory with variables from OpCode and LTA research to elucidate the manifest psychology of the State of Israel under three leaderships - Prime Ministers Ariel Sharon, Ehud Olmert, and Benjamin Netanyahu. The authors seek to detect variance over time in each leader's operational code beliefs in response to their characteristics and a changing social context or environment (i.e., terrorism). One of their main conclusions is that both Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert tended to respond less aggressively than Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the event of an attack from Hamas.

In his article on "Have Middle Eastern Leaders Learned from the Arab Uprisings? An Arabic Operational Code Approach", Canbolat (2025) analyzes the patterns of learning of three leaders from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region - King Abdullah Hussein of Jordan, President Bashar al-Assad of Syria and Emir Sabah of Kuwait - during crises; most specifically, subnational crises with regional repercussion as those experiences in Jordan, Syria and Kuwait, respectively, during the Arab uprisings. Canbolat contributes to the understanding of three MENA leaders by explaining the content and evolution of these leaders' foreign policy thinking based on their experience and learning during the mentioned crises. Methodologically, Canbolat also shows the importance of studying leaders in their native tongues. He uses an original Arabic operational code analysis to assess the three Arab leaders.

Finally, Thiers (2025) maps out the state of the foreign policy field in Latin America from the vantage point of the study of leaders. While she shows how studies on the region of Latin America have contributed to the foreign policy field, she also finds that scholarly publications from Latin American scholars are underrepresented in top English-based IR journals. Among the reasons for this lack of representation, Thiers argues, are language barriers and the fact that Latin American scholarship still confuses foreign policy with the *isms* of grand IR theories, especially Neorealism. This focus on the state as the unit of analysis impedes opening the black box of the state and overlooks the agency of leaders in foreign policy-making. Her

review of the literature shows that Latin American leaders are still treated anecdotally in these accounts and not with their predispositions and agency.

## **New Methods and Areas of Inquiry in Foreign Policy Analysis**

FPA is a field that employs a diverse range of methods and methodologies to explore how states and non-state actors navigate the complexities of IR. Whereas qualitative methods such as case studies and historical analysis with emphasis on process tracing (George and Bennett 2005) have long been preferred by FPA scholars, interviews with policymakers, discourse analysis, and content analysis of speeches, policy documents, and media coverage provide valuable insights into the motivations, perceptions, and cognitive biases of decision-makers. For example, Holsti's (1976) methodology for content analysis has been widely used to study leaders' beliefs and attitudes. These methods offer detailed insights and contextual information into specific foreign policy decisions or events.

Quantitative approaches, particularly statistical modeling, are also utilized to identify patterns and test hypotheses about foreign policy behavior. These methods are often employed in large-N studies to analyze the impact of variables such as economic indicators, military capabilities, and alliances on foreign policy outcomes (de Mesquita, et al. 2002). FPA scholars studying the public perception of foreign policy of individual states or public opinion on certain foreign policy issues use surveys to assess public opinion and its influence on foreign policy. They also provide data on the perceptions and preferences of policymakers and elites, as demonstrated in studies exploring the interplay between domestic politics and international behavior (Aldrich et al. 2006). Similarly, experimental methods, such as randomized controlled trials and scenario-based experiments, allow researchers to test hypotheses about decision-making under controlled conditions, providing valuable insights into cognitive processes and behavioral tendencies (Mintz et al. 2006). Today, many FPA scholars comfortably use a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of foreign policymaking.

More recently, computational techniques, such as machine learning and text mining, have expanded the scope of FPA research. The computational methods facilitate the analysis of large datasets, including social media content and diplomatic communications, to uncover trends and sentiment in foreign policy discourse. In addition, the rise of cyberspace as a domain of foreign policy has prompted new methodological developments. Scholars employ network analysis, cybersecurity simulations, and digital ethnography to investigate cyber diplomacy and the strategic use of digital technologies in foreign policy.

The diversity of methods and methodologies in FPA underscores the field's commitment to understanding the complexities of decision-making in an ever-changing global context. From qualitative and quantitative approaches to mixed methods and emerging trends, FPA scholars continue to innovate, ensuring that their research remains relevant and impactful. This methodological plurality enhances FPA's robustness and positions it as a dynamic and evolving discipline within IR.

Ergurum's (2025) contribution in the special issue shows the reader the different possibilities explored and unexplored of computational methods for the further enhancement of foreign policy, especially its micro foundations. This paper provides a rich overview of recent advancements in using computational methods in foreign policy and its pending tasks, challenges, and potential biases. Three specific areas for computational analysis are text analysis, geospatial analysis, and network analysis. This paper also provides a road map for the future at the interplay of computational methods and foreign policy within the three mentioned areas of research.

In their contribution, Lorci and Li (2025) present a rationalist model of foreign policy decision-making in cyberspace, an exciting new area of research in FPA studies. Lorci and Lee emphasize the pivotal role of foreign policy makers in bridging traditional geopolitical strategy and the digital realm. By focusing on two key variables - perceived hostility and balance of power - the rationalist model they present outlines how states choose among three levels of cyber action: espionage, destabilization, and conflict. In this study, leaders are treated as rational actors who assess risk and utility, with cyber actions selected based on their strategic value and potential consequences in the physical world. The model is tested through several empirical case studies, including US espionage against Germany, Russia's cyber conflict with Ukraine, China's espionage campaigns against the US, and the US-Israel Stuxnet operation against Iran. The study positions cyberspace as a domain of high politics, integral to national security, diplomacy, and global power dynamics. It emphasizes leadership perception and decision-making as central to understanding cyber strategy. By framing cyber actions as instruments of statecraft, the study provides a practical and theoretical foundation for policymakers navigating the complexities of international relations in the digital age.

## Conclusion

This special issue demonstrates the continued dynamism and intellectual vitality of FPA as a subfield of IR. By embracing theoretical and methodological pluralism, the contributions here reaffirm FPA's capacity to explain complex international behaviors and push the field's boundaries in new and exciting directions. Innovative approaches to leadership analysis, emerging areas of research like cyber security and the role of emotions in FPA, and the increasing relevance of computational methods, the articles collectively highlight how FPA remains well-equipped to grapple with contemporary foreign policy challenges. Moreover, by expanding the geographical and conceptual scope of the field, this issue encourages future scholars to think beyond traditional paradigms and engage with the evolving realities of global politics. As such, the insights presented here serve not only as a reflection of the field's progress but also as a roadmap for the next generation of FPA scholarship.



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