Chapter 1

Why Study Foreign Policy Comparatively?

Chapter Preview

- Explains what distinguishes foreign policy analysis as an approach to the study of international politics.
- Explains the difference between foreign policy options, decisions, behaviors, and outcomes.
- Explains the difference between individual, state, and system levels of analysis.
- Explains the value of studying foreign policy comparatively and the basics of the comparative method.

Why Study Foreign Policy?

Leaders have made many puzzling foreign policy decisions across the years. Although some of those decisions turned out to be of little consequence and have been largely forgotten, on many occasions such decisions have plunged countries into major crisis or war. Consider the following decisions, which both reporters at the time and historians who wrote about them later found puzzling.

Saddam Hussein, leader of Iraq, invaded Kuwait in the early 1990s only to find that the United States, under President George H. W. Bush put together a coalition to push him back out. Saddam Hussein knew that the United States was more powerful and much better armed than Iraq. Although Iraq had, in those days, one of the stronger militaries in the region, it was no match for a superpower. Saddam Hussein may have calculated that the United States was too preoccupied with the demise of the
Soviet Union and the collapse of the latter’s economy to worry about his invasion of a small neighboring state. A meeting with the American ambassador to Iraq, career diplomat April Glaspie, reinforced his assessment. She made the now-famous statement that “we have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts like your border disagreement with Kuwait.”

Saddam Hussein may have interpreted this to mean that the United States would not take action if his military attacked Kuwait. Should he have realized that the United States, no matter how much it appeared to be otherwise engaged, could not accept his seizure of the small, but oil-rich Kuwait?

Decades earlier, Neville Chamberlain, prime minister of Britain, made a fateful deal with Adolph Hitler of Germany during the infamous Munich conference of 1938. Britain would not object to Germany’s seizure of the Sudetenland, a portion of Czechoslovakia bordering on Germany and with a German-speaking population, as long as Hitler promised he would respect the sovereignty of the remainder of Czechoslovakia.

This small country in the heart of Europe was a very recent creation at that time: it had been carved out of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of World War I, just two decades earlier. It was a multiethnic state, home to the Czechs and Slovaks as well as German, Hungarian, and other smaller ethnic minority groups. Chamberlain returned home confident he had made a deal that would preserve the peace in Europe—an important consideration in a time when the memory of World War I and its enormous toll in human lives was still very fresh. He thought that meeting personally with Hitler had allowed him to judge the latter’s character and trustworthiness. He could not have been more wrong. Hitler continued his conquests and soon Europe found itself immersed in World War II.

In the early 1960s, Nikita Khrushchev of the Soviet Union made a decision to build launching sites for nuclear missiles in Cuba and soon found himself embroiled in a crisis. American U-2 spy planes photographed the launchpad while it was still under construction. The discovery came on the heels of the Bay of Pigs fiasco, during which American-trained Cuban exiles had attempted, and failed, to topple Fidel Castro, Cuba’s communist leader. The Cold War was still in full swing, and President Kennedy was presiding over a military buildup that would give the United States clear superiority in strategic weapons—something Khrushchev could not ignore. Under those circumstances, the possibility of being able to reach U.S. soil by placing missiles in Cuba was quite tempting, especially since the Soviet Union did not yet have the capacity to launch intercontinental missiles. In addition, the United States had missiles close to Soviet soil in Turkey. Khrushchev may have concluded that placing missiles in Cuba was comparable. Should Khrushchev have been able to foresee that no American