Explaining Foreign Policy: International Diplomacy and the Russo-Georgian War by Hans Mouritzen and Anders Wivel

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The particular and the general: The challenge for foreign policy studies

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Anyone interested in understanding – or explaining – foreign policy has plenty of material to work with.[1] The 193 current members of the United Nations represent an unimaginable number of possible bilateral relationships, to say nothing of the multilateral combinations and different issue areas to be taken into account. And this is to focus on one historical moment alone, when most analysts want to draw on the treasure trove of history for their arguments. It must therefore be evident that if we want to make any general kind of statement about foreign policy behaviour we have to do it on along three sets of lines: (1) *a priori* analysis about the nature of foreign policy and the environment at which it is directed; (2) extrapolation from a small number of cases, which may or may not be explicitly claimed to be 'representative' and/or particularly revealing of things that are of general importance; and (3) systematic data collection of a 'big N' set of cases of a given class of events or actors. Almost all work in the field of Foreign Policy Analysis falls into one or other of these categories, while all three have their merits. The *a priori* analysis of the first approach is variously that adopted by realism in its different forms, but also by some variants of constructivism. Extrapolation from case-studies – a form of induction – is common, as in the use of famous works by Glen Paige or Graham Allison, and to a lesser extent in my own *Cabinet Decisions in Foreign*

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Policy (1991). The third approach, of big N studies, was that of Michael Brecher in his monumental International Crisis Behaviour Project.[2]

The Mouritzen and Wivel volume *Explaining Foreign Policy* manages to combine all three approaches, which is quite an achievement in 200 pages. Its ladder of levels methodology means that it starts with the international system, as the level most likely to provide a parsimonious explanation of the various puzzles with which it is concerned. As the book is essentially empirical in nature this is not quite Approach 1 as described above, but it does proceed on the basis of certain basic assumptions about 'states as rolling billiard balls' mainly concerned with balancing power and capabilities (p. 25), which is to import a general principle from which deductions can be made about behaviour. The authors also rely on the case-study method, presenting us with a detailed and authoritative analysis of international diplomacy over the Russian-Georgian war of 2008. In this context they argue that the study is capable of generating a 'new explanatory framework' for foreign policy studies, and in particular 'an alternative to the easy-going relativism' (pxi) of Graham Allison's influential work (Allison and Zelikow, 1999). Yet Mouritzen and Wivel also follow the third approach to some degree in that they analyse 40 'state positionings' revealed during the crisis in order to discern which of the systemic, interstate and intrastate approaches has most explanatory power. The three 'cuts' thus taken are individually revealing, while in combination they represent a significant contribution to our understanding of foreign policy.

The findings of the research presented in the book generally highlight the interstate dimension, or that involved in an understanding of the importance of position on the world map. This is a welcome and convincing counterpoint to the reliance of so much literature in International Relations on various kinds of structural or systemic approaches. The familiar territory of neo-realism stresses the importance of conceptualisations such as bipolarity, multipolarity and unipolarity – even if none of these ever seems to quite fit the complexity of international politics and the diverse range of states that makes it up. For their part, economically driven interpretations identify patterns such as globalisation or dependency. Either way, the tendency has been to identify big sexy concepts that offer an overarching view of the international system as a whole and from which strategies for the actors/agents within it can be deduced – whether they be prudential realism, pre-emptive defence, balancing, bandwagoning, self-assertion or group solidarity, multilateralism big or small, or national import-substitution and resistance. Insofar as there is an empirical focus on the agent level at all, there is a similar reliance on grand generalisation, as with such notions as overstretch or rising powers.

Much of the debate that occurs at this systemic level is sophisticated and lively. But it is also usually remote from the texture of events and conceals some normative positions about how international politics is/has to be that are equally strong as those in the classical realism that it has left behind. Can these approaches therefore provide a truthful account of how and why things happen, given that they are so relentlessly top-down and from such a stratospheric bird's eye view? Common sense would suggest that we need a combination of structural and agent-focused views and data – and this is how Mouritzen and Wivel have proceeded. They are looking to generalise but they also recognise the need to be sensitive to context – and to detail. In this they are firmly in the scholarly tradition of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), even if they might jib at that description given their evident scepticism over the added value of the decision-making approach. Apart from an interest in what happens within the inner circles of an elite, FPA stresses the value of both inside-out and outside-in explanations of state behaviour, and provides a raft of middle-range theories to use. It also represents a key bridge into political science, currently striving to come to terms with IR but not finding other obvious points of contact – apart from political theory.

Many central aspects of FPA have a bearing on the issues that Mouritzen and Wivel address, in both the particular and the general – even leaving aside both the large literature on decision making, and the special case of crisis conditions, which evidently impose notable stresses on participants by compelling more pressing and bifurcated choices than they would otherwise face.[3] The first of these is geography, meaning the spatial dimension of world politics. The term geopolitics fell out of favour for decades, due in part to its association with the theorists of Nazi expansion, but also due to the subjective and unscientific nature of the grand claims made in its name. Historians of diplomacy never really abandoned the paradigm, and social scientists have returned to the concept in recent years as an object of study, especially from a critical perspective.[4] But geopolitics is still usually about 'the big picture', while 'critical' in this context usually means scepticism about the conventional focus on a dominant 'great game' played by the major powers. This is helpful so far as it goes, but it does not allow for the fact that even an understanding of power politics requires thinking about the local and regional geography of particular states, something far too often neglected.[5] *Explaining Foreign Policy* rightly draws our attention to the spatial dimension, which must be taken into account if we want to know why the United States ultimately backed away from confrontation with Russia in the latter's backyard, and why indeed the Russo-Georgian conflict flared up in the first place.

Yet the particularities of place, distance and topography are far too often missing from academic discussions of international conflicts. Even geographers, many of whom

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are now IR specialists flying under a flag of convenience, do not tend to privilege these matters. It is partly a problem of intellectual compartmentalisation. No analyst of the effects of climate change, for example, could afford to omit the differential impact on states of rising sea levels, weather patterns, resource depletion or ambient temperature – or foreign policy considerations. All of us may suffer in the long run from global warming, but en route we know that there will be some sharp differences between winners and losers that are likely to shape patterns of international politics. The same should apply when trying to assess the options of a given state. In IR one needs to take into account not only capabilities in power terms, but also a state's possession of underlying resources, and the nature of its challenges, internal and external. Pakistan, for example, faces obvious difficulties given the nature of its mountainous frontier with Afghanistan, a large and poor population, and the dispute over Kashmir with its powerful neighbour. By contrast, the United States is virtually invulnerable to external attack, which is why the events of 9/11 were unpredicted and so shocking. It makes a difference that it enjoys a form of continental insularity not open to Russia or China. The advantages and disadvantages bestowed by position, resource bases, topography and climate should be a basic starting point in any attempt to understand states' behaviour, which is why it is astonishing that they are so often neglected in the IR literature.

Another way in which Mouritzen and Wivel demonstrate the advantages of a typical FPA approach is through their use of a case study. As stated above, they combine the detail of a time- and space-limited crisis with the systematic treatment of a relatively large number of actors, which is unusual. In effect, they follow the 'structured, focused comparison' method advocated by Alexander George, but that is usually interpreted to mean that a detailed case should be examined in such a way as to make a comparison possible with those who might then conduct other, equally detailed cases. They might be 'hard' or 'soft' tests of a given set of hypotheses, but they should always be set up so that the data generated are logically comparable (George and Bennett, 2005; Rapport, 2013). Mouritzen and Wivel certainly follow this injunction – it is easy to imagine other international diplomatic crises being examined along the lines they suggest, while allowing for the possibility of either similar or highly divergent findings, which is an indication of methodological biases in the set-up having been minimised. But they are distinctive in their ability to combine a close focus on events with a wide enough scope to catch all the multilateral interactions of those with a possible stake in the events in Georgia – which by their reckoning was around a quarter of the world's states. This means, *ipso facto*, a sacrifice of the fine-grained approach needed to examine decision making and domestic politics inside individual actors. And arguably this sacrifice had a powerful influence on their eventual conclusions, which had little time for the 'intra-state' level. But at least the logic of their approach is consistent and transparent, making it easy for contrary propositions to zero in on any weak points. In fact, the book is marked by an admirable clarity and conciseness in the writing, which is sadly ever less true of IR as it becomes more 'professionalised'.

These qualities notwithstanding, there is much to be said also for the close-focus case study that treats just one state's foreign policy making, or at most studies a critical bilateral relationship. This comes closer to the historical method but in FPA maintains an interest in process, and uses well-defined, replicable, concepts and categories in the search for explanations. At the same time, it does not necessarily force detail into the deadly procrustean bed of hypothesis-testing (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2013). Rather, such studies bring politics alive for scholars and students, focusing on the often life-deciding choices at stake in international relations. It is important that research monographs strike the right balance between on the one hand professional rigour and on the other attention to the issues that animate decision-makers and citizens. The Russian-Georgian war certainly fell into the latter category, and not just for the main protagonists, as was evident with the dramatic rush of President Sarkozy of France to mediate a ceasefire in a dispute more than 3000 kilometres distant from Paris. Other cases that deserve detailed deconstruction are the various decisions to go to war – or not – over Iraq. When the Chilcot Inquiry Report is finally released in Britain it will be a treasure trove for foreign policy analysts interested in fiascos and accountability, which is probably why it is currently being sat upon in Whitehall (Porter, 2013). Similarly enlightening studies could be produced of various states' reactions to the Arab Spring events, and of decisions in the eurozone crisis. Unfortunately, however, this kind of revealing, close-textured work is only possible in the democracies – and it is difficult enough there. The equivalent for China and even modern Russia still depends on the limited techniques of Kremlinology.

There are other dimensions of foreign policy and its making that Mouritzen and Wivel partly capture but cannot do justice to in their relatively short book. One is the issue of efficacy, or the measurement of a state's ability to achieve its goals, which may be stated or unstated, consensual or partial. This raises the question of the purposes of foreign policy, perhaps self-evident in general terms but quite variable between actors and issues. What criteria should we use to judge achievement? The wishes of the government or society more generally? The approval of contemporaries or of posterity? Analysis here entails an auditing of the possible

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alternatives, and even a counter-factual approach, to tease out the real or imagined constraints on decision-makers. The costs, both quantifiable and moral, also need consideration, from the viewpoint of the acting state and of its target. Such a discussion leads naturally to such areas as defence economics and 'soft power', which are given much attention in both popular and scholarly literature but tend to be insufficiently tied into the study of actual dilemmas in foreign policy.

A further key area for any analyst of politics, in foreign or domestic policy, in a state or in an organisation such as the EU and NATO, is leadership. To achieve any significant foreign policy a modern leader/executive group has to cater not just the elite, but the wider political class and in many cases also wider public opinion. For not only does this ensure some degree of legitimacy but it also spreads round responsibility so that in the event of failure the political costs at home may be contained. Conversely, leaders cannot resist getting involved in international issues, even when their interests did not initially run in that direction, for they offer welcome distractions from domestic problems, together with opportunities to burnish their personal profiles. Thus, Sarkozy seized the initiative over mediation in the Russo-Georgian war, and Vladimir Putin used the crisis to teach lessons not just to President Saakashvili in Georgia but also to western opinion about secession and the consequences of Kosovan independence. Not every individual occupying the three roles of heads of government in these three countries – France, Georgia and Russia – would necessarily have taken the precise initiatives seen in 2008, which means that as analysts we have an obligation to understand at least the personal motives and political contexts in which they were operating, as well as the consequences of their particular actions.

This brings me to the last and most important area of FPA downplayed by Mouritzen and Wivel, less through lack of space than because they believe it to be of less importance than the systemic and inter-state levels of explanation. This is what they call the intra-state, and what others term 'the domestic environment'. Without being in a position to contest the findings of their impressive research in this case study, I take it as axiomatic that the intra-state should not generally be relegated to the status of a 'luxury theory' (p. 41). For if we concede, as they do, that external and internal considerations interact in any foreign policy, then it follows that the latter helps to shape understandings of the former, and vice versa. If they are completely separate realms, then perhaps the authors are right to assume that the domestic only comes into play in terms of a residual policy space left once external factors have determined the margin for manoeuvre. But this seems to me to be an artificial formulation that leaves little room for perceptions, for the kind of diverging domestic forces that have produced hyper-nationalist responses in Serbia, and pacifistic ones in Germany, and for constructivist interpretations more generally.

A given state's relations with the outside world are not fixed, even allowing for the importance of its particular geopolitical situation. Of course certain important constraints exist, especially of attempts to change the status quo, as Napoleon and Hitler discovered in their Russian campaigns. But when O.K. Pate famously replied to R. G. Collingwood by saying that 'people cannot conceive of their insular position in any way unless they live on an island', he was missing the fact that islanders are far from always insular in outlook, as the history of the British demonstrates.[6] Geography, like every other 'external' fact, is filtered through the experience and politics of a community, leading (at least in the short term) to some unpredictable reactions – such as the Japanese decision to attack Pearl Harbour, or the Norwegian decision to stay out of the EEC. There is no simple correspondence between geography or a state's power position on the one hand, and its actual foreign policy decisions on the other. What ultimately decides a state's policy is how it – or more often its elite – interprets the position. It is not uncommon – as with Georgia in 2008 – for a state to make strenuous efforts to go against the grain so as to build up advantages that it did not initially possess – as with Israel's determined rise over 50 years to the position of dominant power in the Middle East.

Ex post facto it is relatively easy to see where the constraints, and good judgement about them, lie. Before the fact, the mentality (and even psychology) of leaders does play a part, together with domestic politics and overall political culture, in determining the nature of a state's goals, and its reactions to unexpected events. If we add to this mix the fact that many states are becoming increasingly diverse in their ethnocultural makeup, with migration producing multiple transnational linkages such as diasporas, religious loyalties and even transgovernmental alliances, then the notion that decisions are taken by combining external with internal contingencies is in itself an insufficient concession.[7] For the very distinction between the two realms is becoming blurred. Moreover, foreign policies, and foreign policy cultures such as German pacifism or Swedish neutrality, are in a condition of permanent evolution – in part, evidently, in response to changing external conditions, but also in part due to the changing natures of their societies, that is, of the people whose interests they exist to serve.

Mouritzen and Wivel understand these arguments for the importance of domestic politics perfectly well. Although in my view they are wrong to underplay certain factors, such as the role of ideas and of the psychological dimension, their conception of a state's 'action space' allows for variations in our understanding of how the

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different levels of international politics interact, and where intra-state forces might come in. In that, and through their sophisticated general analysis, they have done us all an important service.

Notes

1 Hollis and Smith (1990) posit a sharper distinction between the two approaches than most would now want to concede.
2 Michael Brecher, with Jonathan Wilkenfield, *A Study of Crisis* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997; paperback and CD-ROM edition, 2000); also http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/icb/. The project was supposed to generate a large number of volumes from multiple authors containing comparable in-depth case studies, an aim that turned out to be too ambitious despite Brecher's own massive commitment. For an example of the cases that were published, see Shlaim (1983).
3 For a definition of crisis that differs from the conventional stress on the imminence of war, see Hill (2003, p. 319, note 10).
4 The most ambitious recent historical treatment is Simms (2013) in his *Europe: the Struggle for Supremacy from 1453 to the Present*. For critical geopolitics, see Ó Tuathail *et al* (1998, pp. 1–12).
5 One exception is the Italian semi-academic monthly *Limes: Rivista Italiana di Geopolitica.*
6 An exchange cited in Sprout and Sprout (1969, p. 45). Conversely, landlocked states such as Switzerland may also display insularity – whatever that is.
7 For a discussion of the changing character of European societies, and the links to foreign policy, see Hill (2013). For transgovernmentalism, see Slaughter (2004).

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Foreign Policy Analysis 2.0: What we talk about when we talk about foreign policy

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If peace and security are the hallmarks of a successful foreign policy, the foreign policies pursued by the Western countries since the end of the Cold War, we are told, were surely more successful than any since Napoleonic times. To say this, of course, is in itself contentious. Where some, such as Steven Pinker, notes an upward surging trend

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toward a general decline in violence (Viking, 2011, pp. 7–12), others, Niall Ferguson among them, view the twentieth century as one of the bloodiest in human history (Penguin, 2006, pp. 4–9). At its most fundamental level, the debate is whether the international system has put its difficult past behind it, or whether it is prone to backsliding into the politics of distrust and policies of force. This is, essentially, the latest installment in the age-old debate on whether human history is linear or cyclical in nature.

The Russo-Georgian war of 2008 was important, mainly for its symbolic significance. This brief, one-sided conflict, which lasted only 5 days and ended in a resounding Georgian military defeat, may have wide and lasting ramifications not only for the people and politics of the region, but also for international relations more generally. Once the outside chance of an American intervention was dispersed with, the conflict joined the swelling ranks of international conflicts with a thousand casualties or less (SIPRI, 2013, p. 13). Not unlike Argentina's ill-fated Falklands adventure, the initiator found itself ruefully underprepared for high-intensity conflict with a great power. Georgia lost some 20 per cent of its territory, in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, territories that for the most part had not been under Georgian control before the conflict.

The war shocked many. Mainly because the hostilities seemed to question some widely held truths, among them that the light and mobile expeditionary forces that, by 2008, had come to dominate NATO armies performed poorly in high-intensity conflict with a rusty conscript army. Quantity beat quality. It appeared that the Western-trained soldiers were not very good at holding land, which is the main point when you are fighting for your own country. Second, the war challenged liberal internationalist assumptions that the international system has somehow morphed into an international community of interest and that, as a result, inter-state warfare was a thing of the past. Presumed outdated notions of spheres of interest, sovereignty and so on were at the core of the conflict. The war also challenged realist views by offending against a key attribute of 'balance of power' politics – namely that great powers would refrain from bringing their disproportionate military strength to bear in disputes with smaller powers in the entourage of other great powers out of fear or triggering balancing strategies (Vagts, 1948). As it were, the Russian strategy paid off. The United States did not intervene.

New armies are not good at territorial defense. War is not a thing of the past. The balance of power will not save you. It is in part due to these untimely maxims that the conflict is generally treated as an anomaly, as spurious data. And it is as a counterpoint to this normative assumption that Mouritzen and Wivel's book receives its importance. That importance is notable for two reasons. Explicitly, *Explaining Foreign Policy* presents an in-depth case study in contemporary foreign policy. Implicitly, the book provides a lucid and vivid exposure of the faults of contemporary political thought in the Western world. Considering the prevailing emphasis on global values, supranational governance and peaceful resolution of differences, the West's response to the crisis was surprisingly timid. In a dual sense, then, the book marks a revival of political science theory, especially since it concerns itself with the current international system.

Explaining Foreign Policy grew out of Mouritzen and Wivel's dissatisfaction with two opposite trends developed in the study and practice of international politics after the Cold War, namely structural realism and social constructivism. The former was the dominant Cold War paradigm. The latter originated in the fusion of liberal internationalism and postmodernism and gained popularity in the 1990s. The authors present Foreign Policy Analysis as an alternative. That said, the authors define structural realism as «our point of departure» (2012, p. 29), while they do little to hide their skepticism regarding the added value of the latter approach. This is not the place to flesh out the nuances of social constructivism and postmodernism in international relations analysis. It suffices to say that much analysis was founded on an assumption that the nations of the world can put centuries of conflict behind them by concentrating on shared norms and mutually beneficial cooperation. This was bolstered by an «end of history» assumption that the spread of Western values would be bolstered by more states gravitating into the Western sphere and its collective security arrangements (Fukuyama, 1992).

Georgia was once a poster child of this overall logic. The country had emerged from the USSR a semi-authoritarian, semi-sovereign state. Under the stewardship of Eduard Shevardnadze, Georgia sought close relations with the USA, despite being within what Russia saw as its sphere of interest (Donaldson and Nogee, 1998, pp. 156–159). Georgia soon became a major recipient of US foreign and military aid and declared an ambition to join both NATO and the European Union (EU). In 2002, the United States sent Special Forces to train the Georgian army as part of the 'Georgia Train and Equip Program'. From 2004 Georgia sent substantial troop contributions to the US-led war in Iraq (Jones, 2010, p. 70). Even if the Bush administration's push for an immediate offer of a NATO membership action plan to Georgia at the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008 was blocked, Georgia was in the camp routinely referred to by US presidents as 'friends and allies'.

When Georgian government soldiers, armored vehicles and artillery descended on Tskhinvali, the capital of the breakaway region of South Ossetia, on Friday 8 August 2008, the move caught most observers by surprise. Amidst images of burning buildings and bombed-out tanks, Georgia's president, Mikheil Saakashvili, declared that his forces had liberated the area from separatist control. Within days the advances were reversed as Russia responded in force,

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overwhelmingly deploying its army, navy and air force. Immediately following the Russian thrust into Georgia through South Ossetia, Russian-backed forces in Georgia's other 'frozen conflict' in Abkhazia – a secessionist region that had effectively seceded from Tbilisi in 1993 – went on the offensive. Georgian civilians and soldiers were pushed out. As Russian forces drew near the capital Tbilisi, Georgia was faced with the prospect of a comprehensive military defeat.

A conflict that had been festering for years had at last erupted. Claims and counterclaims abound as to the immediate cause of the fighting. The question of 'who to blame' persists to this day. Academic analysis of the war has for the most part focused on the consequences of the war, rather than on the antecedent events. As Cornell and Starr (2009, pp. 3–9) point out, the views of the analyses of the consequences are invariably shaped by the narrative one accepts on the events themselves and their historical context. The two main positions are highlighted in various works. In the polemical *A Little War that Shook the World*', the former US diplomat Ronald D. Asmus tells the story of a plucky small state being abused by an aggressive great power while the world looked the other way (2010, pp. 216–218). Most academic analysis hand Georgia a significant share of the blame for what came to pass. Stephen Jones (2012), one of the foremost experts on the region, assigns a significant portion of the blame to poor Georgian leadership.

Mouritzen and Wivel's book on the empirics of decision making was therefore written in auspicious circumstances in that it has no apparent teleological or geopolitical agendas, other than the desire to explain the phenomenon at hand. There was a case to be made both in terms of the decisions for war, but also for explaining the international response – and lack thereof. After a comprehensive mapping to the positions of individual states, the authors find that the kaleidoscopic nuances of Georgian, German, Swedish, French and Ukrainian responses translate into small yet distinct differences in behavior. The authors find that out of 40 sets of foreign policies, only one – Russia's – can be said to follow from incentives on the systemic level. China, for one, mixed systemic and inter-state considerations. The vast majority of cases are, according to the book, better understood from inter-state incentives. The authors distinguish between a systemic level with great powers, side by side with an inter-state level encompassing all relations other than those predicted by neorealism (Mouritzen and Wivel, 2012, p. 39). For only four states, the displayed behavior needed recourse to domestic politics on the intra-state level.

Equally interestingly, the authors find that personal relations were of scant relevance in the Georgian war. Georgian President Saakashvili's many friends in the West did not translate into material foreign-policy support. The European countries were divided into those who criticized Russia's actions, those who criticized Georgia and those who took a neutral stand. Most countries were found in the latter camp, limiting themselves to issuing carefully nuanced statements. This was particularly evident in the post-Soviet sphere. The authors note that the EU has had little luck in harmonizing member states policies. This is in itself noteworthy, not least since the French President brokered a halt to hostilities under an EU banner. The book concludes that war and its outfall was a result of Georgia underestimating Russian military capacity and misjudging its resolve while misreading the limits of Western support in case things went sour. The United States, being caught unaware by the conflict, is viewed as an intelligence failure.

Given a momentous task of analyzing the foreign-policy choices of 40 international actors in some 200 pages, the study does a fine job, with its main strength lying in a transparent research design and a consistent application of the conceptual framework. The authors' preference for jargon 'for the fun of it' will not be to the liking of all, but may appeal to the new generation of scholars that the book is aimed at. In order to explain the foreign-policy reactions to the Russo-Georgian war, the authors employ three explanatory levels: the system level, the inter-state level and the intra-state level. The book's use of sources from Wikileaks can with some degree of certainty claim to reflect accurate policy considerations rather than the public relations' rhetoric and *ex poste* justifications ever bountiful in international studies. This leads to a predictable criticism, but one that needs to be stated. The authors are unable to fully explore the potential of their theory because much of the information is classified and will remain so for decades to come.[1]

Having effectively compartmentalized three categories of explanations in an 'explanatory ladder' where explanations are first sought at the system level first and internal level last (and only if need be), the authors' study pays less attention to the political, historical and cultural context in which the actors in question arrived at their foreign-policy choices. It is perhaps fortunate that so many of the states are found in the two categories as data collection would, presumably, have been unmanageable had many of the 40 cases required intra-state explanation. The authors are to some extent open to criticisms that the underlying assumptions allow the authors to arrive at such clear-cut conclusions regarding the various actors' motivations. For example, the analysis of various material factors, such as economic motivators or military capabilities, is sufficiently detailed; there are few references to sources that could have helped determine the prevailing mood in the countries at that time.

In many ways, *Explaining Foreign Policy* is a trailblazing exercise, one that has even been compared to Graham Allison's seminal work *Essence of Decision* (Sakwa, 2012). This comparison is justified in that both are case studies for future studies into governmental decision making. Both books deal in triptychs, even if to this reviewer's

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mind Mouritzen and Wivel's explanatory ladder is more elegantly parsimonious than Allison's, as the editions piled on, ever more cumbersome framework. Where the two books part is on how the 'black box' of domestic policy making is to be treated. Allison is keenly interested in the inner workings of the government apparatus. He begins with John F. Kennedy's claim that «The essence of ultimate decision remains impenetrable to the observer – often, indeed, to the decider himself» (quoted in Allison, 1971, p. 7). The book presents a vivid look at decision making under pressure in a single state viewed through three conceptual lenses: the 'rational actor' model, the 'organizational process model' and the 'governmental politics' model.

Mouritzen and Wivel take a rather different path. The study seeks out 'interesting' rather than 'full' explanations (2012, pp. 22–23). This *léger de main* could be read as an implicit critique of that Allison's three models actually delivers in terms of explanations and not on the inner workings of bureaucracy. Instead, explanations are first sought on a systemic level, then on the inter-state level, and if still bereft of a persuasive explanation, the intra-state level is examined. A more obvious comparison is, of course, Waltz' *Man, the State and War* (Columbia University Press, 1959), where the analytical framework applied by Wivel and Mouritzen is laid out in similar terms as those employed by the authors. While clearly being inspired by Waltz' perspectives on the three levels that explanations can be sought, *Explaining Foreign Policy* is a theoretical *status quo ante* – a re-submergence into the uncertainties and manipulations of diplomatic history that Waltz sought to escape, while avoiding the murky waters of intra-state politics: a level the authors seem to demand much of and deliver little on in terms of explaining foreign-policy behavior.

While the authors' intention to combine insights in foreign-policy choices from different analytical levels is clever, their emphasis on parsimony in the form of an 'explanatory ladder' is eminently deployable but not unproblematic. The book leaves important questions unanswered, leaving the question as to whether the reluctance to break open the 'black box' of intervening variables is justified. Why were systemic factors more important than inter-state considerations or indeed intra-state domestic factors? Let me elaborate: Is it necessary to examine 40 different cases when three cases would do (the response of Georgia, Russia and the United States)? On the structural level, the remaining 37 actors are not system maintaining powers and could, subsequently, not be expected to balance *in lieu* of American balancing just as the crisis surely was not dramatic enough to encourage bandwagoning? In that sense, the systemic level could be said to deliver more that it is given credit for.

Likewise, the inter-state level contains important nuances that are somewhat under-emphasized in the analysis. Take the case of neighboring Norway and Sweden. While Sweden responded strongly and vocally to Russian use of force, Norway's response was muted. The authors' claim that Sweden 'over-balanced' Russia as a result of internal (read personal and historical) factors, while Norway's more dovish response was inter-state motivated (Norway was at that time in the process of negotiating a border agreement with Russia in the high north) (2012, pp. 130–134 and 118–120). Perhaps. But both responses could also, reasonably, be placed at the inter-state level. Sweden's response could, reasonably, be construed as small state defending the international norms and rules that favor militarily weak states in the international system.

Conversely, Norway's response could be tied to intra-state factors such as the received wisdom of a previous attempt at lecturing Russia on international standards (while Norway was at the helm of the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) in the 1990s), which were seen to have harmed the national interest (Larsen, 2000, p. 12). Likewise, the Swedish governments' internally agreed focus on human rights and democracy, which later in 2013 led to the expulsion of Swedish diplomats from Belarus, was likely a factor determining the response to the Georgian conflict. Perhaps the answer is something as simple as the non-allied Swedes not receiving NATO memos, thus leaving the Swedes to come up with their own wordings? For the scholar interested in the finer nuances of European responses, a more fine-grained explanatory model is therefore needed.

These critiques are, however, weighed up by the frugality and research economy of the analytical framework, which the authors defiantly refer to as 'dynamite' (2012, p. 26). The study's great strength is that while informed by the past decades of theoretical inquest, it applies these huge structures in such an effortless manner that they become genuine tools of analysis. As is the case with a great many truly worthwhile innovations, the model comes across as obvious. The explanations presented as to the various responses of the states involved in the 2008 conflict seem valid. The overall conclusion: a Europe made up for the most part by dovish pragmatists, alongside marginalized 'anti-Russian' states is indeed both 'interesting' and it follows from the analysis (2012, pp. 197–198). No small feat.

Note

1 Wikileaks have for the most part published documents in the categories 'Controlled Unclassified', 'Confidential' and 'secret' – not in the 'top secret' bracket that one would expect that much of the information regarding the Russo-Georgian war is expected to be found.

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Of salient environments, action spaces and weak states

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'Russia's large-scale military response [to the Georgian attack on South Ossetia 7 August, 2008]', so Mouritzen and Wivel (2012) summed up their study of the 2008 war, 'was … systemic, a successful rollback of the sole superpower from the Russian "backyard" ' (p. 187). The findings seem robust and they appear to be supported by subsequent developments at both the system and regional level.

When Russian President Vladimir Putin delivered his now-famous remarks about post-Cold War unipolarity and the 'almost uncontained hyper use of [military] force' at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, he signalled more strongly than before Russia's intentions to soft (and increasingly, hard) balance the United States at the system level.[1] The decision by then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev to respond to the Georgian attack on South Ossetia with a counter-offensive was merely a step – albeit a very important one – in this direction and it has since been followed by other deliberate balancing efforts, the more spectacular and successful of which have been related to the civil war in Syria.[2] By late 2013, it would seem that Russia has narrowed the gap separating itself – and other second-tier states – from the United States. The future world order is likely to be more to Russia's liking than it has been at any time in the post-Cold War years.[3]

And when Putin made an emotional reference, in 2005, to the break-up of the Soviet Union as 'the greatest geopolitical disaster of the 20th century', he indicated not only his strong emotional attachment to what is known in Russian political parlance as 'the near abroad', but also signalled his intentions, in one way or the other, to bring the now sovereign states closer together again within a more coherent organizational structure. Paradoxically, following the August 2008 war Georgia left the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the very organization that Putin has strived to strengthen. His reasons for doing so are multiple, but given Russia's shortage of allies, there is little doubt that he sees in the CIS also a pool of potential allies in the struggle to balance US power and unipolarity, including the enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (Hansen, 2013). The most ambitious integration scheme so far, Putin (2012) has announced the establishment by 2015 of a new Eurasian Economic Union, built on the foundations of the CIS, that is, its own 'backyard', and delivering what this latter has failed to do.

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As I share the conclusion presented by Mouritzen and Wivel – that it was a systemic response with a regional expression (‘stay out of “our” sphere of influence’)[4] – I will not address this further. Instead, in the remainder of this short essay I will discuss and add perspectives to three central issues that I find spring from the work by Mouritzen and Wivel on *Explaining Foreign Policy*: Salient environments, action spaces and weak states.

Salient Environments

An important contribution by Mouritzen (1998, pp. 7–11), the idea of the salient environment stresses the fact that states are located – and fixed – in very different neighbourhoods. The systemic pressure may be felt and responded to differently by different states as location serves to shape their interpretation of it and to define their room for maneuvre. It adds, slightly simplified, the regional level to our understanding of the system–state nexus.

The CIS, the broad theatre of the August 2008 war, provides an illuminating example of the importance of neighbourhoods. None of the member states – altogether 12 at the height of the organization – are part of NATO or (for the European states) the European Union (EU).[5] Indeed, few areas in the world show such clearly delineated organizational borders as Europe. The organizations are not sealed off from each other as during the Cold War (the COMECON and the Warsaw Pact on the one side and the European Economic Community and NATO on the other side), but a relatively clear line may still be identified. Except for Georgia, which finds itself in organizational ‘no man’s land’ following its departure from the CIS, every state in Europe belongs, either formally or informally, to one of the two sides and there is no mixing.

Regardless of how the policy choices on either side of this divide are interpreted in general terms, they do show marked differences as the states cluster around the two distinct centres of power, Moscow and Brussels, respectively. The CIS states appear to be engaging in two different types of behaviour – to balance the West or to bandwagon with Russia – but either produce the same outcome as the other: The states keep their distance from the West, either voluntarily or because they feel forced to do so. Thus, fiercely anti-Russian and pro-Western, even former Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili did not lead his country’s exit from the CIS before the events of August 2008 made the situation inside the organization fully intolerable (Hansen, 2013, p. 144).

Remarkably, Mouritzen and Wivel (2012) find that of the 40 sets of behaviour analysed, only one (Russia) can be understood by looking at the system level alone (p. 191). The other sets require a more detailed look at either the salient environment or, for the full luxury model, even domestic conditions. This is an instructive reminder for those who swear by system-level explanations; temptingly parsimonious, they may just miss central points at closer scrutiny. The current unipole may seem to be the centre of the world, but states apparently live in smaller, local worlds of equal if not greater immediate importance.

Returning to the CIS case study and when excluding the two belligerents, Russia and Georgia, 10 member states remain. That none of these engaged in full systemic balancing against the United States is remarkable and quite an anomaly. The picture that was just painted of the CIS is one partly of fear, one in which some states side with Russia because they fear the consequences of not doing so. I still believe this to be true – witness, for instance, Armenia’s dramatic September 2013 turn-around announcement that it favours the Russian-led integration projects over closer ties with the EU[6] – but it is clearly more complex than that. These member states may have decided *not* to engage in systemic balancing, as we would otherwise expect from structural theory, as this was likely to strengthen the regional hegemon. And what is more, they felt strong enough *to do so*, thereby demonstrating that a broad slogan as ‘threat-driven bandwagoning’ may contain many finer nuances and possibly surprises (Schroeder, 1994).

Needless to say, the findings about the apparent lack of explanatory power at the system level are important and demonstrate the relevance of the salient environment. Paradoxically, this suggests that large- or at least medium-*n* studies as the one presented in Mouritzen and Wivel’s book – sweeping analysis across a relatively large number of cases – are problematic. If the explanations have to be unearthed below the system level, then clearly it requires some degree of social science archeaology, digging slowly and with great attention to detail.

Action Spaces

In their work, Mouritzen and Wivel (2012) also zoom in on *external* action spaces, defined as the ‘ability [of a state] to remain unaffected by other states’ power and influence’ (p. 41). When the state is facing external tension and danger, the extension of the domestic political scene is reduced as actors (have to) group themselves together to avert and possibly to confront the danger in unison. There is less external action space as certain types of behaviour are simply ruled out by the exigencies of the situation. The opposite holds true when the external environment is benign.

The evaluation of course is based on a *subjective* interpretation of the external environment and the state’s position within this. Consider, for instance, the varied responses of a number of Western states to the alleged Iraqi programme of Weapons of Mass Destruction ; while some felt that military action was urgently needed, others were of the opinion that the threat was not so imminent and of such a magnitude as to warrant this (Longhurst and Zaborowski, 2005). We should see the external action space then as a

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function of other states' *perceived* capabilities and intentions *and* the individual state's capacity to withstand those.

This gives the action space an important domestic dimension: The interpretation of other states' capabilities and intentions. As indicated, the theory of the external action space holds that the level of external danger defines the amount of freedom in policy formulation enjoyed by domestic actors. These latter, however, may shape the general view of the external danger – and they may do so in ways which will cause the action space to either widen or become more narrow. Depending on political preferences and a view of the opportune, an external danger may be played down or blown up. If done convincingly, this will shape the public understanding of what constitutes appropriate behaviour.

Within this context, situations where political actors *deliberately* paint themselves into a corner are of particular interest. By presenting a certain interpretation of other states' capabilities and intentions, they may cause a situation where A may almost only be followed by B and where any alternative(s) (C, D, E … Z) is/are considered illegitimate. Although political actors will usually want to maintain freedom of action – as a minimum an exit strategy – they may occasionally decide to sacrifice this in order to achieve a certain outcome.

By using the term 'the greatest geopolitical disaster' – and making references of a similar nature – to describe the Soviet collapse, Putin has played on the emotional attachment to the former unitary state which many Russians still hold and by doing so has also made it more difficult to compromise on the ambitions for the post-Soviet space. He has skillfully tapped into and has added to the widespread Soviet nostalgia, which visitors may observe in Russia, and which has raised the possible costs for politicians willing to 'just let the CIS go'. 'The near abroad', in itself a condescending label with suggestions of less than complete sovereignty on part of its constituent entities, clearly holds a special place in Russian (geo-)political thinking; it is widely seen in zero-sum terms, and while Moscow regrets any centrifugal tendencies within the area, it fears even more that other states or international organizations will drag additional former Soviet republics out of the Russian sphere of influence.[7] The CIS space should be kept together if at all possible – even at a relatively high cost to Russia – and it is politically problematic to suggest otherwise (Hansen, 2013, pp. 147–148).

This zero-sum thinking, which also relates to Georgia, is partly an outcome of the public framing of Russia's position in the world – past, current and future. Powerful metanarratives now insist that the West has always viewed Russia with suspicion, has feared its power and has sought to reduce its capabilities.[8] In this environment of hostility – in the post-Cold War era fuelled by the United States – Russia has to be constantly concerned about its 'political competitiveness' as the Kremlin started phrasing it in the mid-2000s (Hansen, forthcoming). This relates mainly to its internal set-up – hence the rejection, for instance, of Western-style democracy which is considered unsuitable – but also to the outside world: To win and maintain allies and to deny others access to those same allies (ibid.).

The point here is that while leading Russian politicians will argue that the August 2008 war gave them a small external action space – leading them to group around the strategy observed – they had already brought themselves in that direction; the combination of a dog-eat-dog view of the world and an insistence that the CIS space is not quite as international as the rest of the international system would seem to have foreclosed most alternative readings of the role of the West in the transformation of this space. The external action space was small but it was partly by the Kremlin's own doing. It had shaped its *domestic* action space – the viable policy options available before the electorate – in such a narrow way that both systemic and regional challenges could be met in quite specific ways only.

As neoclassical realism holds, the perception and interpretation of material factors is an important intervening variable (Reichwein, 2012). The system – and its underlying regional levels – is not just 'out there'. It is shaped by the meaning given to it by domestic actors (MacMillan, 2009). And these may of course act instrumentally, thereby hoping to lead political processes towards a specific outcome.

Weak States

Although Russia used military power against Georgia before it proceeded to recognize the sovereignty of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia, a number of its closer allies did neither. This holds true most spectacularly for Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, the last four of which also sit, together with Russia and China, in the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO). As noted earlier, while structural theory would have led us to expect these states to engage in systemic balancing together with Russia against the United States, they did not (Mouritzen and Wivel, 2012, Chapter 8).

As briefly suggested by Mouritzen and Wivel (2012, p. 179), we may attempt to find part of the explanation in the issue of state strength and weakness, seen here as the level of socio-political cohesion within the state (Buzan, 1991, pp. 96–107). As South Ossetia and Abkhazia represent secessionist challenges the question of *horizontal* legitimacy, defined as the extent to which various groups and communities agree to co-exist within the borders of the same state, matter more (Holsti, 1996, pp. 90-102). We find here, all things equal, that the more cohesive the state, the more free it will be to balance systemically and regionally. When there is no need to be concerned about the possible effect on local break-away movements, the state may

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attempt to balance through a policy of (threatened) recognition (Buzan *et al*, 1998, p. 142).

The SCO identifies secessionism as an 'evil' to be fought (Nikitina, 2009, p. 88). This reflects the fact that several member states, most notably Russia and China, struggle with secessionist groups (in Chechnya and Xinjiang, respectively). It remains a firm principle of the SCO that the sovereignty of each and every state in the international system must be respected and that secessionism must be discouraged. Moreover, when SCO heads of state met in Dushanbe in late August 2008, this is the principle which China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan had decided to respect. Russia left empty-handed.

This alerts us to an important aspect of balancing behaviour at both the system and the regional level which is left somewhat unfolded by Mouritzen and Wivel (2012, pp. 175–180) as they give primacy instead to interstate rivalries; this is the fact that states may be held back by other and more pressing concerns much closer to home. Given the record of Russia – two large-scale civil wars within two decades – there is little doubt that the actual decision to recognize the sovereignty of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, both bordering on Russia's most volatile region, the Northern Caucasus, was made with some trepidation. If Putin's centralizing efforts were at some point to be rolled back, the autonomous areas of the region could easily find inspiration in the precedence set not only by their neighbours in South Ossetia and Abkhazia but also by their own government. However, concerns at the system (an emboldened West) and regional (a weakened sphere of influence) level trumped this.

The reverse was true for China. However tempting it may have been to extend recognition to South Ossetia and Abkhazia and thus to do damage, however indirectly, to the United States, the regime decided against this.[9] By doing so, it also helped the smaller states, some of which actually have a deeply troubled relationship with the United States, to defend the common 'bastion position', that is, a principle which can 'never' be compromised, in the face of *Russian* pressure.[10] This tells us something about the importance attached to the principle of non-interference and to its possible effect as an intervening variable.

This case emphasizes the importance of looking inside the state when discussing balancing. The theory may predict a certain behaviour at the system or regional level, but the state may find that the possible costs of doing so are prohibitively high. This of course is not new (Walt, 1987) but it is still instructive to see how concerns about domestic stability may lead states to forego what would otherwise be considered easy international wins. It also suggests just again how fruitful analytical co-operation between people from general and specific research areas promises to be; while one group supplies the overall framework which allows for comparison across cases, the other group adds the context-specific information, including cultural intelligence, which makes up the cases (Mirsepassi *et al*, 2003). The further down the explanatory ladder we have to go (Mouritzen and Wivel, 2012, p. 6), the more this co-operation seems needed.

Notes

1. The September 2013 Russian naval build-up in the eastern Mediterranean Sea may be seen as a cautious attempt at hard balancing; as an increased number of United States and French warships arrived in the region to put pressure on the Syrian military, Russia's show of support for its Syrian ally seemed to increase the possible costs for the United States and France of punishing the Syrian regime and military for the August 2013 chemical weapons attack on Syrian civilians.
2. Examples include the September 2013 naval build-up just mentioned, the multiple use of the veto power in the United Nations Security Council and statements condemning the US policy (see, for example, Putin's initiative at the September G20 Summit in St. Petersburg, *Russia Today*, 2013).
3. This is a sign of increasing power as this was defined by Deutsch (1966, p. 115).
4. It could perhaps also be seen as a regional response with a systemic expression: 'Do not leave "our" sphere of influence to bandwagon with the unipole as this latter is clearly unable to protect you'.
5. As mentioned, Georgia left the CIS following the August 2008 war (its departure took effect in August 2009), and Ukraine and Turkmenistan both claim associated membership status.
6. One commentator explained how '[Armenian] President Serzh Sargsyan abruptly declared that Armenia would join the Kremlin's customs union, scrapping years of work toward agreement under the [EU's] eastern partnership program'; in *The New York Times* (2013).
7. It may be argued that by acting swiftly and decisively, the West in general made it possible for Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to catapult themselves away from the Russian-dominated political space.
8. Metanarratives are 'stories that answer ultimate questions about the origins, purposes, and fate of societies and their institutions' (Schwartz, 1998, p. 64).
9. Mouritzen and Wivel, (2012, p. 177) argue that the Chinese policy was not just rooted in concerns about Xinjiang; regional competition and zero-sum rivalry between Russia and China also played a role.
10. (ibid., p. 22). These smaller states include most notably Uzbekistan (from within the SCO) and Belarus (from within the CIS).

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Contrasting Allison, challenging Waltz: Geopolitics and the study of foreign policy

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The August 2008 war between Georgia and Russia lasted only 5 days, but it has had a lasting impact on international relations in terms of precedence. In a decade marred by the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington and the ensuing US-led responses in Afghanistan and Iraq, the 2008 war – along with the almost simultaneous Wall Street meltdown and the Chinese space walk – played out as an epilogue to the American world order. The United States remained the strongest state measured in combined capabilities as well as in military power, but the US ambition of creating a seamless globalized world characterized by political liberalism and market economy was laid to rest by Russia's reassertion of its sphere of interest and the inability and unwillingness of the United States and its allies to respond.

The war presents us with a series of interesting foreign policy puzzles: Georgia's attack on Tskhinvali putting the national security and international reputation of Georgia at risk; Russia's swift and seemingly well-prepared retaliation leading to a quick and overwhelming Russian victory; the limited support from the United States to Georgia, a close political, economic and military partner; the many different responses of the European countries and the seemingly successful post-war mediation of the EU; and the cautious unified response by China and Russia's near abroad (Mouritzen and Wivel, 2012, pp. 3–4).

The aim of 'Explaining Foreign Policy: International Diplomacy and the Russo-Georgian War' is to explain these puzzles while at the same time using the 2008 war as a springboard for explaining foreign policy in general. Drawing on personal interviews, written official and academic sources and the revelations from WikiLeaks, we analyse a number of foreign policy positionings related to the war, allowing us to evaluate the explanatory potential of three explanatory levels in foreign policy studies: (1) the international system (anarchy, polarity,

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balance of power); (2) the interstate level (geopolitics, geoeconomics); (3) intrastate factors (decision makers' misinformation and misperceptions, 'lessons of the past' and domestic politics). We seek to identify where the most explanatory 'dynamite' is to be found and to explore the potential for combining insights from different explanatory levels. In contrast to the relativist perspectivism of Allison's (1971) 'Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis' , we do not tell a story of complementary and mutually exclusive perspectives. In contrast, we take a supplementarist approach arguing that 'an explanation based on one specific level can be supplemented with factors belonging to other levels, if it cannot in itself account satisfactorily for what it set out to explain' (Mouritzen, 1997, p. 75; cf. Wolfers, 1962).

The aim of this contribution is to unpack the logic of our foreign policy theory and to respond to the main points of criticism raised by Hill (2014), Toje (2014) and Hansen (2014) in their above discussions of the book. In order to do this, we proceed in three steps. First, we discuss the overall logic of our endeavour and its contribution to the study of foreign policy. Second, we discuss the 2008 war and its implications for international society. Third, we turn to a more fundamental and general discussion of foreign policy explanation.

Geopolitics: The Missing Link in Foreign Policy Analysis

Organizing assumptions about international relations according to a level of analysis logic is not new to realist thought, Waltz's, 1959 seminal treatise on *Man, the State and War* being the most notable example. However, as noted by Toje, in contrast to Waltz our study engages with exactly those uncertainties and manipulations of diplomatic history that Waltz sought to escape (Wivel, 2013; Toje, 2014; cf. Waltz, 1979). For that reason our book may be viewed as an addition to the recent wave of studies by so-called neoclassical realists, who have sought to combine Waltzian assumptions about the anarchic structure of the international system with other explanatory factors (cf. Rose, 1998; Lobell *et al*, 2009). We share with neoclassical realists a concern for the effects of power politics on foreign policy and a starting point in the realist tradition in international relations. Moreover, like neoclassical realists, we find that structural realist assumptions about the international system are a useful, but insufficient point of departure for explaining foreign policy (Schweller, 2003; Rathbun, 2008).

However, we deviate from most neoclassical realists in two important respects. First, our starting point is more explicitly Waltzian. Neoclassical realists, although starting from a Waltzian conception of the international system, rarely begin their analysis by applying neorealism but prefer instead to construct more complex models awarding considerable attention to the intrastate level with an aim to explain foreign policy and specific historical events. This analytical strategy has been rewarding, both in terms of shedding light on the voids left unexplained by neorealists and by explaining deviations from neorealist expectations (Ripsman *et al*, 2009). However, it has also left neoclassical realism vulnerable to criticism of lacking internal logic and overly complex *ad hoc* analysis, even from those sympathetic to their overall endeavour (for example, Walt, 2002; Wivel, 2005). Our strategy for solving the dilemma between *either* parsimony *or* explanatory power is a ladder of levels methodology starting with the international system providing the most parsimonious explanation and then stepwise abandoning parsimony for more variables allowing us to explain more but at the expense of adding complexity (Mouritzen and Wivel, 2012, pp. 24–26).

Second, we find that neoclassical realism as well as foreign policy studies in general suffers from a blind spot when it comes to one important explanatory factor: geopolitics. Foreign policy is typically explained in terms of one of two models; one taking its point of departure in the international system, the other taking its point of departure in domestic politics. In the first model, foreign policy is interpreted in light of the global power structure, that is, relative state capabilities. This model is favoured by international relations scholars in general and realists in particular, and it has had a particular strong impact on the study of small states (Elman, 1995; Hey, 2003; Browning, 2006).[1] The second model explains foreign policy in terms of domestic politics and foreign policy decision makers. Variations on this model predict that foreign policy is likely to reflect domestic institutional balances, the perceptions of decision makers and bureaucratic interests. This model is favoured by the majority of scholars engaged in foreign policy analysis. The two models share a blind spot: none of them pays attention to explanatory factors that are neither located at the system level nor the domestic level. This is a problem, because small states in particular tend to formulate their foreign policies in the context of the challenges and opportunities emanating from their geopolitical neighbourhood, in particular the nearest great power(s). Thus, we need to insert a third level of explanation, the interstate level, between the system level and the intrastate level.

Accordingly 'Explaining Foreign Policy' challenges conventional explanations of foreign policy by presenting an alternative explanatory model. The book analyses how 40 countries responded to the Russo-Georgian War in 2008. The overall conclusion is that geopolitics explains the vast majority of cases analysed. In Europe, the reaction to the war from most countries can be explained in terms of proximate power balancing. Only Germany (overcautious)

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and Sweden (overbalancing) are unexplainable in terms of the interstate level as both countries' reactions reflected decision makers' lessons of the past rather than the geopolitics of the present. Ukraine did not even manage to come up with a unified position because of domestic politics, in turn conditioned by its location on the fringes of NATO (making membership attractive to some) and the demographic factor (its big Russian population in the East). China's low profile and limited support for Russia are best explained as a compromise between two competing interests. On the one hand, China has a systemic interest in Russia strong enough to trouble the United States and, on the other hand, China has an interest in resisting Russia dominating Central Asia on China's Western border and geopolitical concerns over separatism at home (which might be encouraged by Abkhazia and South Ossetia). The fear of separatism in the Chinese case is used by Hansen to display the explanatory power of domestic politics. As already indicated, however, we might argue that such fear is more about geopolitics than domestic political process: separatism might, in the worst case, lead to the creation of new, probably hostile, states on China's border and a reduction in Chinese capabilities, in other words a 'geopolitical disaster', to quote Vladimir Putin. Although illustrative of the importance of geopolitics, the 2008 Russo-Georgian war is just one example among many. As argued by Christopher Hill above, the foreign policy of any given state is difficult to understand without reference to 'the particularities of place, distance, topography'.

A New International Order?

It was Georgia's underestimation of Russian strength and misperception of Russian intentions combined with overestimation of US diplomacy, which set in motion the series of events, which quickly erupted into war. Underestimation and misperception followed from Western reassurances of Georgia and serious Georgian and US intelligence failures. Trust in US intelligence was probably caused by plain superpower admiration in combination with the inexperience of the Georgian leadership. However, the war between Russia and Georgia was also a conscious reassertion of Russian power in its 'near abroad'. In itself the war was as much a signpost of this changed order as a game-changer in itself. Challenging Russia called the bluff on the US world order. To the United States, the end of the Cold War allegedly signalled the end of traditional power politics played out among great powers jealously guarding their own spheres of interest and viewing smaller states merely as pawns in a game played by the most powerful actors in the international system. This 'new world order' promoted by politicians and intellectuals was characterized by political and economic liberalism, globalization and a society of states with equal rights for all states, strong and weak (Bush, 1991; cf. Fukuyama, 1992), although these ideas seemed to play a much more prominent role in political rhetoric than in foreign policy. Among the key policy implications of the new world order was that democratization of illiberal states, whose autocratic leaders were still trapped in the mindset of the old order, would create a more peaceful world. As noted by Mandelbaum (2002), this idea resonated well with the public of the United States and its allies: 'It was flattering, for it meant that the more the world reproduced their own political arrangements the more tranquil it would be; and it posited that their form of government, which they valued and promoted for its own sake, had an additional, unexpected benefit – as if cherry-topped cheesecake had turned out to be not only tasty but nutritious' (p. 241).

Toje is right to point out that our book may be read as an intervention in a debate between liberal (and occasionally constructivist) optimists and their realist critics. Georgia is a most likely case for the defence of the American world order. One of the top recipients of US economic and military aid, hailed as a 'beacon of liberty' by George W. Bush and viewed by US policymakers as an important example of the possibility for democratization in the post-Soviet sphere, Georgia may be regarded as the jewel in the crown of the American post-Cold War empire. If the United States was not able or willing to defend Georgia, where (outside the Euro-Atlantic area) would it be willing to uphold the basic principles of its world order in the face of a great power reasserting its sphere of interest? Of course, as noted by Hill, this raises the question of how to judge the (in)actions of those involved, only partly captured by our analysis: on what criteria should we judge foreign policy achievement? A full discussion of this would involve assessments of restraints, policy alternatives and quantifiable as well as moral costs and benefits for domestic and international orders.

In addition, as pointed out by Toje, the war questioned other assumptions upon which the United States and its allies had built their security policies: the light and mobile expeditionary forces that now dominate NATO armies would have been of little use against the old-fashioned Russian conscript army. Moreover, the Georgian soldiers, who had been the subject of multimillion dollar US-sponsored training programmes, proved incapable of defending their own territory, and furthermore some of them were in Iraq at the critical time as part of the US-led coalition.

What Does it Mean to 'Explain' Foreign Policy?

Hansen and Toje both point to the value of a more fine-grained explanatory framework. Toje argues that focusing on only three cases – the United States, Russia and Georgia – would have allowed for more in-depth case studies. He finds that the inclusion of the remaining 37 cases may do

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more to eschew the analytical results than to underpin the conclusions about the importance of the interstate level for explaining foreign policy. The reason is, he argues, that we would expect neither balancing nor bandwagoning at the system level from these states. In addition, he argues, the parsimonious 'ladder approach' may lead to conflations of interstate and intrastate explanations and the underestimation of intrastate factors because of limited knowledge of the domestic politics and historical details of individual countries as well as restricted access to sources.

Similarly, Hansen in his discussion of our book points to 'the importance of looking inside the state when discussing balancing'. Domestic costs may overrule systemic or geopolitical incentives. In addition, foreign policy decision makers may affect or even manipulate domestic costs in order to deliberately restrict their own action space thereby creating seemingly inevitable decisions (cf. Putnam, 1988). For Hansen, one major implication is the potential fruitfulness of cooperation between international relations scholars, foreign policy scholars and area studies experts with more specific knowledge of the cases under scrutiny. We are sympathetic to this line of argument. Indeed we take our point of departure in a similar position arguing that any explanation should be based on a theoretical platform regarded as a strategic starting point for researching the complexities of the world rather than a self-sufficient and closed paradigm (Mouritzen and Wivel, 2012, p. 5).

Christopher Hill voices a similar critique in his contribution. While praising our study for its internal logic and clarity and its ability to combine important explanatory factors at different levels, he is concerned that we award (too) 'little time for the intra-state level'. To Hill, this has potentially important consequences for the interstate and system level as well. The three levels, Hill argues, cannot be kept completely separate, because the external 'facts' of the system and intrastate levels are filtered through the experience and politics of a given community and the perceptions of its foreign policy decision makers. Elite interpretations, not geopolitical givens, are decisive for state action. Thus, whereas Toje and Hansen argue in favour of closer attention to detail, a greater room for complexity, and a richer account of how country- and area-specific facts challenge our assumptions and create more foggy 'grey zones' between levels of analysis, Hill challenges us to explore what these 'facts' are, and how these levels of analysis may be constructed by decision makers.

We find that these points of criticism are all valid and valuable for enhancing our understanding of foreign policy. Moreover, as acknowledged by Hansen, Hill and (most explicitly) Toje, they go to the heart of what we mean by foreign policy explanation. We have three answers addressing, rather than refuting, their arguments. First, we should take care not to discuss foreign policy explanation in the context of parsimony versus complexity. An important point in our book is that parsimony and complexity are both valuable, but that each comes at a cost. Our analytical strategy for assessing the costs and benefits is to refrain from an either/or choice between the two and instead conduct our analysis in stages moving from one end of the parsimony/complexity continuum to the other (Keohane, 1986, p. 188; Mouritzen and Wivel, 2012, pp. 6–7). This is a question of research economy as well as epistemological preference.

Second, this is also a debate on what one aims to explain. Hill and Toje both remind us of the virtues and benefits of focusing on a very limited number of cases. We agree that single or limited number comparative case studies allows us for greater attention to decision makers and process and that these studies have a great potential for bringing politics alive for scholars and students. However, our aim is slightly different. Rather than the full explanation of the foreign policy of one or two countries we wish to explain the profiles of a large number of countries, thereby allowing us to draw a picture of the overall foreign policy landscape and its repercussions for understanding international relations and foreign policy more generally.

Finally, although we acknowledge the occasional importance of decision makers' perceptions and shared understandings or even constructions of identities within communities, these constructions live and die with action spaces, which are to a large extent dependent upon relative power capabilities and the ability to project those capabilities. Constructions may affect the use of power, but proximate power plays a vital role in the selection of which constructions are viable for a given country at a given time. We only emphasize constructions or decision making, if there is something *peculiar* about them, that is, if they are responsible for policy deviations from geopolitical expectations – as was most markedly the case when Georgia bombarded Tskhinvali on 7–8 August 2008.

Note

1 To be sure, many single case studies of small state foreign policy focus on the particularities of the state in question rather than the effects of international anarchy and relative power on foreign policy behaviour. However, even those studies typically take their point of departure in a view of the small state as a state with disproportionate opportunities in international affairs because of its lack of power capabilities.

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