Environmental Change and Foreign Policy: A Survey of Theory

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Introduction

Foreign policy processes are important variables in international environmental cooperation. Yet this has been a relatively, though not entirely, neglected area in the environmental studies literature. In this essay we offer an overview of the growing literature on environmental foreign policy. Our aim is to help scholars and students who have not examined this research to orient themselves in the debate. We also identify several lines of research that have received little or no attention, and this could point specialists toward fruitful inquiries. Explaining and understanding cases of environmental foreign policy require consideration of a myriad of actors, institutions and forces. How can we organize and manage all the possible variables and explanations? To help us in this task we can turn to theories of foreign policy and international relations that directly pertain to environmental politics, as well as to other issue domains. Theory is “a way of making the world or some part of it more intelligible or better understood,” or, more rigorously, theory is “an intellectual construct that helps one to select facts and interpret them in such a way as to facilitate explanation and prediction concerning regularities and recurrences or repetitions of observed phenomena.”

Thus, theory helps us understand and explain international environmental policy by simplifying reality and focusing our attention on the actors and institutions, and, indeed, on the broader forces that shape foreign policy and interstate behavior.

We describe a wide range of theories and approaches to foreign policy and international relations, with emphasis on how they can help us to better understand foreign policy in the environmental issue area. (In this survey we cannot, of course, cover everything.) We organize the theories into three categories: systemic theories, which emphasize the influence of the international system, including the distribution of power within it; societal theories, which focus our attention on domestic politics and culture; and state-centric theories, which find answers to questions about foreign policy within the structure of the state and

the individuals who promulgate and implement foreign policies in the name of a given country. Within this presentation of various theories, we highlight the influence of power, interests and ideas.

The literature on international environmental politics has addressed such issues as cooperative arrangements to manage common problems, the effect of the global economy and population growth on the environment, the relationship of environment to security, and the process of international environmental treaty making. The vast literature on global environmental politics has for the most part dealt with questions that fall into the domain of international relations. However, it is worth reminding ourselves that state policies and actions determine the success of international regimes, trade-offs between economic and environmental values, how environmental threats to security are managed, the content of treaties, and more. Therefore, to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of international environmental politics requires attention to foreign policy.

Research on environmental foreign policy should yield insights useful for the wider study of foreign policy. For instance, in the United States it is widely acknowledged that the president enjoys predominance in foreign policy (at least by comparison to domestic policy) because national security is at stake. Is the same true when the issue is the environment? If not, then what does this say about conventional readings of executive-legislative relations? To what extent do national interests rather than bargaining among interest groups drive policy choices? Does the state have an independent role in making environmental foreign policy, or does it simply enact the outcomes of domestic struggles? These questions are yet to be definitively answered in regard to environmental foreign policy, and environmental studies have not been incorporated as fully as they might be into the broader dialogue on the sources of foreign policy.

Global environmental trends are arguably the most important determinants of humanity’s future. If pessimistic prognostications are true, the earth is rapidly approaching the limits to growth. Land scarcity, erosion, water shortages, salinization, the collapse of major fisheries, biodiversity loss, deforestation—all of these and more could limit the amount of food available for a rapidly growing human population, hinder future economic growth, and reduce quality of life for the vast majority of the world’s people. The environmental foreign policies that countries—large and small, rich and poor—adopt to cope with these and other challenges could be crucial in determining humanity’s future on this planet. In the face of such a daunting challenge, identifying and understanding the sources of environmental foreign policy can contribute to removing barriers to ecologically sound ways for humans to relate to the global environment. Thus additional research in this area is important to the project of bringing humans closer to harmony with the environment on which we all depend.

5. See Harris 2000a, 2001b, 2001c, forthcoming [b].
The Study of Foreign Policy

Speaking generally, how might students of foreign policy approach the analysis of environmental foreign policy? Several questions come to mind. Why do states adopt particular environmental foreign policies? What effects do foreign economic, security, and social policies have on the environment? What limits do environmental parameters place on such policies as commitment to national and global economic growth? What is the relationship between environmental foreign policy and other state policies, such as trade policy and domestic environmental policy? or the military's impact on the environment? All such queries can be framed in terms of bilateral or multilateral relations. Our review centers on the first question: Why does a given state adopt a particular policy or orientation on international environmental concerns?

Considerable descriptive work remains to be done. Studies of economic and security policy benefit from a relatively rich information environment. Scholars know the broad outlines of a country's position on alliances, military spending, security threats, and the like. Similarly, they usually know whether a country is protectionist or free-trader, developed or developing, and so forth. By contrast, a country's position on a wide range of environmental problems may not be known to the scholarly community, much less to the general public. At least in the English-language literature, research that simply describes various countries' positions on the range of environmental concerns is not yet abundant, even in the US case. Although the larger aim of studies such as those at hand is to advance theoretical knowledge, the immediate need is for descriptive knowledge useful to suggesting theoretical propositions.

Turning to explanatory research, one familiar approach is to see foreign policy, like domestic policy, as the product of group bargaining and compromise. If interest group bargaining largely accounts for policy in one domain, then it probably does in the other as well. Hence, environmental foreign policy is presumed to be the outcome of bargains struck among different constituencies with a stake in environmental policy. To explain a given environmental foreign policy or the overall character of a state's policy direction requires identifying the groups that participate, their relative influence, and the strategies and tactics they employ.

Another school also erases the analytical line between domestic and foreign policy but adopts a different perspective on who matters. Class-based theory sees state policy as the result of conflictual relations between the capitalists and the workers. Similarly, elite theory posits a cohesive privileged stratum of society, although without the radical economic analysis of class theory. Usually, the elites dominate, although some issues are of no consequence to them and are left to popular politics. Occasionally, elites must give ground to highly mobilized social movements in order to maintain regime stability. But more often when elite interests are salient, and certainly when maintaining the system of

6. For example, Muñoz 1997.
rule on which they depend is at stake, elites make policy, anticipating that mass acquiescence will follow. Because of the economic (profit) implications of environmental policies, elites take a strong interest in this issue area and usually attempt to direct the state toward policies compatible with continued corporate freedom and economic growth.

Yet another standard approach to interpreting foreign policy is to see it as the product of institutional arrangements. Here, the line between foreign and domestic policy is clearer. US foreign policy, for instance, can be understood as the outcome of bargaining and compromise between Congress and the president, in which the president is more dominant than in domestic policy. Studies of parliamentary systems are likely to emphasize a prime minister’s relative freedom of action compared to presidential systems. Some studies see differences in policy tendencies between democratic and authoritarian states, arguing that democracies tend to be more peaceful than authoritarian systems. In all these ways and more, the institutions of the state—from regime type to legislative rules—are said to shape and determine policy outcomes.

Another broad stream of foreign policy analysis sees leadership as crucial. This often leads to studies of the foreign policy preferences of top executives, such as the US president. It also suggests studies of decision-making processes in the foreign policy inner circle. This might include analysis of the psychology of group decision making, to take one prominent research direction. Lastly, many foreign policy analysts assert that the best approach is to take the state as a rational, unitary actor responding to incentives given by the international system. For this line of thought, domestic variation matters little. States are often taken as like units similar to firms in an oligopoly market. The question is to specify state interests in a given domain and then to show how well or how badly the state defended its national interest.

A Typology

These general tendencies in the study of foreign policy can be understood in more precise terms. Part of our task is to identify theoretical perspectives on this topic that remain unexplored or that seem to call for further investigation. Also, much of the scholarship on international relations contains implicit foreign policy arguments and findings. A typology of foreign policy toward the environment will help to tease out the contributions international relations studies can make to our understanding of environmental foreign policy. For instance, the theory of epistemic communities, which attempts to explain international regime processes, also sheds light on the role of science and scientists in making foreign policy.

Following Ikenberry, Lake, and Mastanduno, we distinguish systemic, societal, and state-centric theories of foreign policy. Systemic theories assume that a large part of state foreign policy stems from the role, identity, or interests given

to the state by systemic factors, as opposed to domestic sources of foreign policy conduct. As noted, one prominent strand of such theory takes the state as a rational, unitary actor. Other systemic theories that do not maintain the rational actor assumption have been advanced. For instance, it has been argued that systemic factors can help determine state self-definition or identity, from which arises the material interests the state pursues.\footnote{Wendt 1999, 257-259.} Societal theory has been briefly described above: interest group or class interactions produce political compromises or bargains that the state then implements. State-centric theory includes the institutional approach described already, plus such versions as the bureaucratic politics model and the organizational process approach. It also encompasses the “foreign policy executive” position advocated by David Lake.\footnote{Lake 1988, 36-39.} Lake’s work suggests that the state does on occasion act according to its national interest, as systemic theory posits. But the national interest is not self-executing; leadership is usually necessary, and the top executives of the nation are the best situated both to see the broad national interest and to act at the domestic level to ensure that policies working toward that end are adopted.

This scheme—systemic, societal, and state-centric theory—has been employed to sort theories of foreign economic policy. The same typology can apply more generally, to include environmental foreign policy. Adding another dimension can reveal other possible ways of interpreting foreign policy.

Hasenclever, Rittberger, and Mayer\footnote{Hasenclever, Mayer, and Rittberger 1997, 1-7.} offer another typology in a comprehensive review of regime theory, which also applies to foreign policy. They distinguish power-based, interest-based, and cognitive approaches to the study of international regimes. Power-based theory, often associated with realism, asserts that regimes form largely due to hegemonic or oligopolist distributions of power. Hegemons (or small groups of leading powers) create regimes that serve their interests, and then impose them on others. Interest-based theory is usually associated with liberal institutionalism. Briefly, it asserts that regimes form when states demand them in order to serve state interests in various issue areas, including economic welfare and environmental protection, among other things. In short, regimes form and are maintained because certain states have some interest in them. Given the interests, hegemonic power is not needed, because rational actors will cooperate to achieve joint gains regardless of power distributions. Lastly, cognitivists emphasize the role of ideas in international politics. Ideas come into play in many ways. At minimum, new ideas might show states novel ways to pursue their interests, whether unilaterally or in collaboration. At maximum, ideas constitute both states and the state system; material interests have little meaning apart from the identities that the international system generates for states and that they in turn help to create.

Foreign policy theory can be understood in the same way. In regard to power-based theory, for instance, foreign policy outcomes might be explained by reference to which actors have the most influence in the policy-making pro-
cess. Perhaps in one case, the prime minister held the most authority, in another it might be top bureaucrats, or yet again leading economic elites. Interest-based theory might focus on which material interests in society different groups promote. Environmental policy might be understood as the outcome of bargaining and compromise toward a common solution in regard to a given problem. No actor or group would be expected to be permanently dominant; rather, temporary coalitions would negotiate for policies that would be broadly acceptable to all affected parties. Lastly, foreign policy might be seen as responding to changing knowledge, perceptions and values in society. Environmental consciousness rose in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and thus foreign policies to protect the global commons ensued. Scientists postulated the existence of a hole in the ozone layer, and so national policy-makers pursued international negotiations toward a treaty to reduce ozone-depleting substances.

Power, interests, and ideas operate at all three levels—systemic, societal, and state. Bringing the two schemes together yields a 3x3 matrix displaying nine distinct approaches to foreign policy (Figure 1). Examples of each are available in the general foreign policy literature, but not all are well represented by studies of environmental foreign policy, indicating some gaps in the literature waiting to be filled. The following sections briefly describe the propositions and expectations each cell in the matrix implies. Studies of environmental foreign policy are sorted according to the scheme. For categories in which research on environmental foreign policy is scarce, examples from the wider foreign policy literature are noted to indicate possible directions for further study.

In practice, the line between one approach and another can blur. A given study might utilize several approaches to provide a comprehensive picture of a given foreign policy process and outcome. The nine approaches identified here need not represent competing theories. Any two or more can be different aspects of a larger theory. The typology not only highlights areas of emphasis, but it also helps to clarify lines of disagreement and alternative interpretations.

Systemic Theories of Environmental Foreign Policy

Again, systemic theories emphasize the importance of the international system in creating state identities, determining what a state’s interests are, and shaping state behavior. These theories suggest that states arrive at their roles, identities, and national interests as a consequence of the regional or global configuration of power (however defined, but usually including military power), or as a consequence of ideas. Systemic theory is distinct in that it does not attribute outcomes to factors such as domestic politics and institutions.

Systemic theory, which might emphasize power, interests, or ideas, asserts that to understand foreign policy requires attention to the structural characteristics of the international political system. For instance, to posit that the state largely responds to the distribution of power is a proposition derived from systemic theory. By contrast, to argue that anarchy varies, implying in turn that ac-
tors perceive their interests in different ways depending on the distribution of ideas about the kind of system they inhabit, is also systemic, but here the focus is cognitive rather than power-based.

**Power and the International System**

The intersection of system and power (the upper left-hand corner of the matrix in Figure 1) yields a Hobbesian world in which states have very little choice but to pursue survival through military strength. Hans J. Morgenthau's work (although admittedly very complex and historically informed) might fit here. For Morgenthau, to understand a state's policy meant to infer from state actions the power-political incentives statesmen saw and reacted to. More recently, Elman has argued that it is possible to develop a neorealist theory of foreign policy (although Kenneth Waltz argues against the idea). States seek power to

survive in a system none individually has created, but in which all must seek power or else fall by the wayside of history. Because of the structure of the system and the ever-present threat of violence, states must concern themselves with relative gains.

Theories of foreign policy that adopt this perspective make two distinct assertions: foreign policy is about acquiring power, and the state’s position in the international hierarchy strongly influences which foreign policies will be rational for that state (and hence by assumption will be adopted). Regarding the second proposition, an example is the argument that hegemonic powers should create open economic systems because their dominance of the international political economy means openness is to their advantage. The important conceptual point is that these assertions are not about the factors leading to regime formation, international cooperation and the like. Many studies have examined the role of hegemony in international environmental politics. The question here is to explain why a hegemon (or any other state, whatever its position in the international pecking order) chose the policies it did. International Political Economy (IPE) has offered the hypothesis just noted—hegemons will favor open trading systems—and give British and US promotion and support of such systems as evidence.

To our knowledge, no one has offered a parallel argument regarding environmental foreign policy. No doubt, systemic, power-based theory would anticipate that environmental issues matter only to the extent that they bear on relative gains. Because policy-makers must adopt a short-term view of matters, they are unlikely to be highly concerned with international environmental problems. Economic and security concerns will sweep away inconvenient environmental policies in times of political crisis. In short, the environment is simply insignificant in comparison to other foreign policy concerns and hence is of little interest to theories that focus on the intersection of power and system. Perhaps for this reason, no logical sequence like that in IPE has been offered to show why a hegemon would prefer one international environmental order over another. Although some studies note the role of US power in helping to form environmental regimes, no study explains this as a consequence of US hegemony. Nor are regional hegemons discussed in these terms. This remains, then, an under-explored line of thought.

**Interests and the International System**

Systemic theories that focus on interests have shown more results for the study of environmental foreign policy. As noted, interest-based theory assumes that rational actors will cooperate to achieve joint gains. Generally, this means they seek absolute rather than relative gains. In many issue areas, the utility of mili-

15. For example, M’Gonigle and Zacher 1979.
tary force is low, and so the overriding concern with security in power-based theory is often absent. Interest-based theory assumes that interests can be identified by the analyst *a priori* (for instance, all states’ interests in economic growth enhanced by comparative advantage). Interests are not understood as the outcome of domestic politics; by assumption, states are rational, unitary actors. Therefore, interest-based theory tends to adopt game theory and economic models to interpret foreign policy.

From this perspective, comparative foreign policy requires only specifying various states’ interests in a given issue area, not looking inside the state at domestic institutions or political processes. For example, states seek economic growth and know, because of the theory of comparative advantage, that free trade results in optimal global output. But they are tempted to cheat on free trade agreements to make economic gains at the expense of the system. The question is how to solve this problem of cheating; state interests in the mutually beneficial outcomes of economic cooperation are assumed. A large part of the literature on international regimes adopts this perspective: “foreign policies as well as international institutions are to be reconstructed as outcomes of calculations of advantage made by states.”

The most prominent study of environmental foreign policy to adopt this view asserts that state interests in environmental questions are vulnerability to environmental damage and costs of abatement. The study predicts that states with low vulnerability and low costs of abatement will be “bystanders,” those with low abatement costs and high vulnerability will be “pushers,” states with high costs and low vulnerability will be “draggers,” and states high on both dimensions will be “intermediates.” The model is tested against two cases: ozone-depleting chemicals and acid rain. “Overall,” the authors conclude, “our theoretical propositions explain much of the positions taken during the negotiations on the Montreal Protocol as well as the Helsinki Protocol.” Barkdull argues in a similar vein in regard to marine pollution, although with more attention to the foreign policy executive’s role in bringing policy into line with the national interest. Similarly, Fairbrass and Jordan argue that the UK sought to maintain national autonomy while participating in EU biodiversity policy, but that entanglements with the international organization in fact resulted in considerable limitation on British independence. Indeed, British environmental policy more generally shifted toward European Union standards due to the process of integration, which escaped the control of the British core state. Eventually, the UK established an agency to coordinate its environmental policy with its European partners.

Another tack on the relationship between national interests, the environment, and foreign policy is to ask whether environmental pressures of various kinds lead to conflict. \(^{22}\) One recent study finds that population pressure can lead to war, especially for low-technology countries experiencing rapid population growth. \(^{23}\) Water conflicts have also received considerable attention, with one recent investigation showing that military preponderance, democratic regimes, and a single state having control over a significant part of the water resources are related to the likelihood of conflict. \(^{24}\) These studies do not attempt to account for foreign policy toward the environment as such and thus do not fit the typology we have developed. Still, as one of the more important recent lines of research, they deserve attention.

Implicitly, many authors adopt a state-as-actor orientation to interpreting environmental foreign policy. Even critics of existing policy tend to assert that “the United States” or “China” or “France” pursues a given policy without attempting to account for the state’s policy choices. For instance, one comprehensive and critical examination of US foreign policy simply describes the policies the country has advocated or resisted without saying why the United States has chosen the environmentally harmful policies it has. \(^{25}\) Such a view is systemic, although the author apparently rejects the notion that the state is acting rationally. With more attention to causes, Carroll \(^{26}\) and Caldwell \(^{27}\) account for environmental foreign policy in terms of perceived national interests. In the same vein, Myers \(^{28}\) and Mathews \(^{29}\) have called for recognizing an emerging national interest in environmental protection, and Springer \(^{30}\) argues that complying with international environmental law is in the US national interest.

### Ideas and the International System

The intersection of ideas and systemic theory has been explored from several angles. Waltz, \(^{31}\) the most prominent advocate of neorealism, argues that the only truly structural variable in an international political system is the distribution of capabilities. Power therefore defines the structure of the system. Recently, Alexander Wendt \(^{32}\) has convincingly challenged this proposition. The “constructivist” view Wendt advances agrees with neorealism that the theory of international politics should be structural and systemic. The point in contention is what belongs at the structural level.

\(^{22}\) Homer-Dixon 1993. 
\(^{23}\) Tir and Diehl 2001. 
\(^{24}\) Huston 1999. 
\(^{25}\) Hunter 2000. 
\(^{27}\) Caldwell 1990. 
\(^{28}\) Myers 1987. 
\(^{29}\) Mathews 1989. 
\(^{30}\) Springer 1988. 
\(^{31}\) Waltz 1979. 
\(^{32}\) Wendt 1999.
Wendt claims that material capabilities and interests account for very little of the structure of international politics. Instead, ideas provide the main structural variable. Ideas constitute states and the state system, which is prior to state behavior within the system. Wendt’s main policy focus is on international conflict and cooperation, but presumably his perspective could be readily extended to environmental politics. If states were to identify themselves as, say, planetary stewards rather than Hobbesian competitors for dominance, then the character of international anarchy would change accordingly. State self-definitions, definitions of the Other, and intersubjective understandings would reflect the structure of ecological ideas, and foreign policies would share that perspective. Michele Betsill, drawing on constructivism, asserts that internationally developed norms matter in the making of foreign policy. Specifically, norms regarding climate change are said to have affected US foreign policy on that issue.

Similarly, Ruggie shows that hegemony alone does not account for the character of the international economic system the hegemon prefers. Post-war American construction of a regime of “embedded liberalism” resulted because the United States was committed to intervention in the national economy along with a system of relatively open trade. In short, not only hegemony, but American hegemony mattered for constructing the post-war international economic order. Likewise, in international environmental policy, the rules and norms would likely reflect the specific policy orientation that major actors such as the United States take toward the environment. The current managerial approach to fostering “sustainable development,” which leaves prevailing political and economic structures largely untouched, responds to hegemonic (American) ideas about the relationship of domestic to international environmental policy (but we are aware of no study that takes up this argument).

Taking another approach, Martha Finnemore has demonstrated the utility of a sociological approach to international relations. Her research shows that ideas and values generated at the domestic level can lead to the creation of international organizations and international policies that are reflected in new institutions in other states. The international structure Finnemore investigates is one of “meaning and social value” rather than power. She notes, “States are socialized to want certain things by the international society in which they and the people in them live.” For instance, Finnemore observes that science ministries are found in most governments. Likewise, environmental ministries are now seen in almost all countries, regardless of level of development or innate concern for the environment. The negotiation of international environmental policy has apparently led governments to see having such a ministry as part of the definition of a modern state. In this reading, international and domestic policy processes exist in a dialectical relationship to one another.

34. See Harris 2000b.
Also focusing on the role of ideas, former Vice President Al Gore’s Earth in the Balance \(^{37}\) asserts that the ecological crisis has arisen due to wrong thinking. (Admittedly, Gore is not engaging in empirical social science, but policy advocacy.) The errant conceptual lenses we use to assess environmental and economic policy goals can be changed. Gore argues that global environmental protection can become a guiding ideal just as did civil rights, the anti-slavery movement, and even anti-communism. In those cases, apparently intractable social problems yielded rather rapidly to new ways of thinking. Gore calls for an ethic of stewardship to direct US foreign policy and international environmental institutions.

Research on epistemic communities has been prominent in the study of environmental politics, with clear foreign policy implications. Peter Haas’ seminal study of the Mediterranean Action Plan claims that states formed an international regime to protect the Mediterranean Sea in part because of the influence of a transnational epistemic community. \(^{38}\) More or less implicitly, Haas’ study is about the factors determining a state’s foreign policy, in this case to participate in a particular environmental regime. The scientific expertise of the members of the epistemic community convinced policy-makers that “saving the Mediterranean” required decisive action. Hence the littoral states adopted policies leading toward international conventions and an international organization charged with cleaning up and protecting the sea. In other words, ideas generated by a transnational community of experts shaped state perceptions of the national interest and appropriate environmental foreign policies, in turn leading to regime formation.

The general message of this line of thought is that ideas operating at the global level affect foreign policy choices. Cognition, then, is not to be understood as a “unit-level” variable properly ignored by structural international relations theory. The distribution of ideas is as systemic as the distribution of capabilities. (Indeed, the distribution of ideas largely determines what counts as a capability.) Systemic ideas have two main effects on foreign policy: in shaping state preferences, and in constituting state identity from which follows preferences and foreign policy. Although some work on environmental policy has been done which adopts this orientation, much remains to be explored.

**Societal Theories of Environmental Foreign Policy**

Societal theory stresses the way in which the preferences of domestic actors are translated into policies adopted and implemented by the various arms of government. As Ikenberry, Lake and Mastanduno frame it, “According to the society-centered approach, explanations for foreign . . . policy are found in the ongoing struggle for influence among domestic social forces or political groups.”\(^{39}\) Government is generally seen as a neutral arbiter or simply as an arena of

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conflict and compromise. It has little independent effect on policy outcomes. In general, the group orientation dominant in society-centered literature implies that the state is passive, a referee adjudicating group bargaining, and fragmented to the point of incoherence itself as a political actor. Class analysis and elite theory also assert that the overriding determinants of a state’s foreign policy are to be found in society. But the state, rather than being neutral, is an instrument of class domination as well as a site of class struggle. In either case, foreign policies are explained by reference to the outcomes of contending societal forces.

Power in Society

Elite theory and class analysis both postulate that understanding foreign policy requires locating the true sources of power. Behind the façade of democratic choice via competitive elections lies an elite consensus regarding which policies to pursue. Elites hold the levers of power in politics, from control over campaign contributions to acting as gatekeepers regarding the public agenda to manipulating public opinion through an oligopoly mass media. The foreign policy elite is recruited from a very small slice of the country, for example, and the “Establishment” persists from one administration to the next, regardless of the leadership’s party. Organizations such as the Council on Foreign Relations and the Trilateral Commission allow the elites in various countries to collaborate and to reach broad consensus on policy directions. Elite interests change slowly, and so policy change is incremental. In some cases, elite and mass preferences are quite close, in others they diverge sharply. But elite control over the levers of power ensures that the structural conditions for capital accumulation and continued elite privilege will remain in place.

In regard to environmental foreign policy, elites would tend to fall into one of two camps. Some would be strong advocates of unfettered economic growth fueled by corporate freedom. Others would acknowledge the need for some degree of environmental protection. The latter would likely endorse a managerial approach that relies on international organizations and international law while maintaining the institutions of the international economy largely unchanged. “Sustainable development” would be defined in terms congenial to corporate interests and economic growth; environmental problems are matters of technology and organization. Environmental protection from the standpoint of the corporation means achieving efficiency in the use of inputs. Insofar as well-run companies are already seeking efficiency, the best way to protect the environment is to encourage corporations to do what they would do anyway for bottom-line reasons. Limits to growth, in this conception, do not exist.40

The making of environmental foreign policy can be interpreted in direct and indirect ways. Elites determine policy, both by holding the levers of policy-making (the revolving door of Establishment foreign policy figures would be

relevant here) and by influencing elected officials. Indirectly, elites shape a society’s ideology and belief systems so as to be compatible with elite policy preferences. The leading ideas of every age are the ideas of the ruling class. Hence transformational alternatives to global capitalism are not likely to receive wide support. They will seem outside the realm of common sense to most citizens. For example, the “ideology of competitiveness” has been so strongly reiterated that it now “has been elevated to the status of a natural law.” 41 This ideology ensures that the pressure of international competition will prevent countries from adopting environmental policies that are too stringent for corporate tastes.

Countless critiques of environmental policy attribute outcomes to the influence of elites, especially corporate leadership. A recent example asserts, “Large multinational firms in particular possess extensive economic and technological power that shapes outcomes in international environmental policymaking.” 42 Another study argues that the emerging practice of granting patents on life forms represents a new form of corporate-led colonialism, akin to the Pope’s granting ownership of the Americas to Spain and Portugal. 43 Among numerous studies asserting that free trade is environmentally disastrous, one author claims, “It is important to realize the new free trade agreements were designed and promoted by associations of businesses for whom environmental regulations are no more than costs that interfere with profits and therefore must be minimized.” 44 Presumably, corporations achieved these free trade agreements in part by influencing the foreign policies of major actors. Levy and Newell 45 offer a study of corporate attitudes toward the environment in the United States and Europe. They find considerable convergence in corporate responses, as opposed to the stereotype of more progressive European corporations and foot-dragging US corporations. This is important, they write, because governments are unlikely to achieve environmental accords against unified industry opposition, and large corporations must often participate in the implementation of environmental policy.

**Interests in Society**

Citizens in pluralist societies are likely to assume that interest group conflict is the best place to focus attention when any policy is in question, foreign or domestic, environmental or otherwise. Similarly, interest group bargaining and compromise is a common theme in the study of environmental politics. In an open society, presumably groups mobilize various resources in a struggle to influence the decisions of the proximate policy-makers. Most of the policymakers directly or indirectly depend on the groups for their positions. They need the votes, the money, and the publicity groups provide. In exchange for

43. Shiva 1997.
44. Goldsmith 1996, 90.
support, they adopt policy stances that gain the approval—and avoid the disapproval—of groups that provide them with needed resources. In environmental politics, environmental groups offer votes, favorable mention in their publications, financial support, and moral approbation for doing the environmentally right thing. Opponents, generally the corporations and businesses that resist costs involved in complying with environmental regulations, muster somewhat different resources (including high-quality legal opinion, and more money) to induce policy-makers to choose their way. Environmental foreign policy is thus a function of the disparate pressures emanating from these (and other) interest groups—and hence seldom fully reflects the interests of any one of them.

Regarding interest group analysis of environmental foreign policy, a notable recent study is Elizabeth DeSombre’s analysis of the domestic sources of US international environmental policy. DeSombre argues that the United States internationalizes its environmental regulations when both environmentalists and the corporate sector see an interest in doing so. This coalition then pushes the United States to seek international agreements that bring other countries into conformity with its own, generally more stringent, regulatory framework.

Another line of study investigates the coalitions favoring and opposing free trade. An unlikely alliance of protectionist businesses and genuine environmentalists opposed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), for instance. A similar protectionist-environmentalist coalition formed in opposition to a large copper smelting operation near the US-Mexico border. US environmental groups’ position on NAFTA, according to one study, represented a minimalist approach that asked only that the agreement not cause greater environmental damage, a view that the Bush administration rejected despite its moderation. Group influence is usually seen as an impediment to environmental foreign policy, but Benedick argues to the contrary that interest groups—including industry—in the United States helped push US ozone policy ahead of European preferences. Beyond this, Lerner aversthat a strong foundation in voluntary civic groups is essential to implementing successful transnational ecosystem management. Texts on environmental politics adopt group theory to explain US environmental policy, with obvious if generally unstated extension to foreign affairs.

**Ideas in Society**

The role of widely held ideas in the making of foreign policy entails the study of such phenomena as ideology, belief systems, stereotypes, myths, and public

47. Yandle 1993, 95.
50. McAlpine and LeDonne 1993; and Shaffer 1995.
52. Lerner 1986.
opinion. It is important to distinguish these broader orientations from the ideas held by policy-makers themselves (to be discussed below). Certainly, we would be surprised if policy-makers’ ideas were not at least partially congruent with more diffuse belief systems. Still, the societal focus reminds us that the key question is how ideas affect such things as group bargaining in society, the outcomes of which the state then more or less ratifies. The main action remains in society, not in the minds of the proximate policy-makers. Using an apt analogy, the policy-makers might make the coaching decisions but the normative and institutional context sets the rules of the game.54

Investigating American ideology, defined as “an interrelated set of convictions or assumptions that reduces the complexities of a particular slice of reality to easily comprehensible terms and suggests appropriate ways of dealing with that reality,”55 offers one avenue to understanding the effect of societal ideas on foreign policy. Hunt’s analysis identifies widely held attitudes in American society regarding the country’s destiny, racial hierarchy, and the dangers of revolutionary ferment abroad as crucial factors shaping US foreign policy on expansionism, imperialism, and contemporary international politics. In regard to environmental concerns, parallel analysis might focus on, for example, the contrasting attitudes represented by Gifford Pinchot and John Muir, the one advocating a conservationist, multiple-use approach, while the other favored wilderness preservation.56 The vacillation between these perspectives in domestic environmental policy would presumably also show up in environmental foreign policy, although no such study exists to our knowledge.

Of course, a more obvious line of inquiry is to assess the effects of liberal, free-market ideology on environmental foreign policy. Peter Doran’s57 position is that “governmentality” as formulated by Foucault limits US climate change policy to a technocratic and managerial attitude toward environmental concerns. US policy is committed to economic liberalization and consequently to the weakening of the state’s ability to manage the environment. American environmental foreign policy is wedded to an ideology of development and economic growth that allows few alternatives. Similarly, Andreas Missbach finds that the United States is laggard on climate change because of its commitment to Fordism and the American Dream, which is a “waste of resources and energy.”58 In general, the ideology of capitalism depends on a commitment to premises that are at odds with environmental protection: endless economic growth, technological progress, and consumerism.59

Different assumptions about economic solutions to environmental problems can influence policy. For example, different conceptions of national self-reliance and free-market solutions to environmental problems have influenced

56. See Pinchot 1998; and Muir 1997.
US and West European global environmental burden sharing and foreign aid spending on environmentally sustainable development - with the Europeans being more willing to take on international environmental burdens and provide assistance for sustainable development in poor countries. 60 Although not about US foreign policy as such, Benjamin Barber’s critique of “McWorld” posits that the consumerist ideology supporting global economic integration is American through-and-through. The global economic institutions that represent the American impulse toward Ruggie’s “embedded liberalism” and an open world economy are, he writes, inimical to protecting the environment. 61

The general point is that beliefs that are widely held in society shape the societal politics of the environment. Whichever model of political choice one adopts—elites and masses, contending groups, public opinion—the terrain on which the political struggle occurs is formed by the way the players define, interpret, and value the objects of contention. Interests are not to be taken as given but problematized and investigated in their own right.

State-Centric Theories of Environmental Foreign Policy

State-centric theory takes issue with the propensity, particularly in American political analysis, to give society rather than the state causal primacy. 62 Hopgood 63 provides an extended discussion of how the state-centric approach applies to environmental foreign policy. Against the tendency to give society causal priority in the study of foreign economic policy, one school sees the state as a persistent institutional structure. Institutional change occurs mainly during crises. Usually, the inertia built into institutions means that they will continue to influence policy outcomes even after the coalitions and ideas underpinning them have lost their dominant position.

A second approach views the state as actor: “Its primary emphasis is on the goal-oriented behavior of politicians and civil servants as they respond to internal and external constraints in an effort to manipulate policy outcomes in accordance with their preferences.” 64 Many scholars in the second camp make a further assumption that policy-makers are concerned with the national interest rather than the particularistic concerns of a domestic constituency. Whatever the nature of their preferences, top policy-makers can overcome domestic interests and institutional inertia by creating new institutional arrangements, taking advantage of their unique position at the intersection of national and domestic politics, and mobilizing inactive social groups in support of their program.

The general message of this perspective is that the state can act independently of societal interests. Also, foreign policy outcomes cannot be read off from the structure of the international system, however defined. States may well pur-

60. Harris forthcoming [a].
64. Ikenberry, Lake, and Mastanduno 1988, 10.
sue the national interest, but nothing is automatic about this. Leaders must develop and implement policy that furthers the national interest, which means overcoming obstacles in society to doing so. Sometimes they succeed, sometimes they fail. On the institutional side, the task is to specify the circumstances that shake policy out of the routine and move it to a new path. The causes can lie in a shift in the distribution of political power within the state, changing interests of key official actors, or new ideas.

Power within the State

Power-based state-centric theory proposes that to explain policy outcomes one must identify which actor(s) in the state dominates the policy process. In the general foreign policy literature, this question has been addressed mainly as a matter of executive-legislative relations. For instance, in the United States, the growth of the presidency, especially after World War II, has disadvantaged Congress in the struggle over the content of foreign policy. Presumably, if Congress had more influence, such policy disasters as the Vietnam War might not have occurred. The Imperial Presidency renders Congress a weak body in foreign policy, a proposition considered to be roughly accurate still, at least in regard to security matters. Several studies of environmental foreign policy assess the relative strength of Congress and the Executive. Paarlberg argues that Congress thwarted the Clinton presidency’s efforts to lead on significant international environmental issues. Similarly, Bryner attributes US foot-dragging on climate change to presidential weakness relative to Congress. By contrast, Barkdull finds that the Nixon administration, by internationalizing the issue of marine pollution, used its position as foreign policy leader to develop and enact into international treaties its own policy preferences.

Another possible way to investigate power within the state would assess the strength of various bureaucratic actors. Foreign policy would be the outcome of power struggles within the state involving such executive branch agencies as the defense ministry, the treasury, the foreign ministry, and the like. Presumably, in different societies, different ministries or agencies would hold the significant power resources. Perhaps the best example of this in the general foreign policy literature would be investigation of the military-industrial complex in the United States. Likewise, those with the resources would have the most say in the content of environmental foreign policy. Indeed, the ability of the military-industrial complex to shape environmental foreign policy might be an object of study. The military may influence foreign policy by adopting environmental causes, under the rubric of “environmental security,” as a way to garner resources or generally justify its existence in the absence of traditional security

threats. Only a few studies of this nature have been done, although many scholars have commented on this phenomenon.69

Hopgood70 argues convincingly that important policy-makers in the executive branch have been primarily responsible for US foreign policy toward the environment. In the 1970s, the State Department’s Christian Herter, and Russell Train, chair of the Council on Environmental Quality, played a large part in US policy leading up to the Stockholm conference, for example. Hopgood uses interviews with key players, internal White House documents, hearings, and other sources to show that environmental interest groups were barely present as the executive branch formulated policy. Meetings with environmental groups were intended more to convey the administration’s position than to seek input. External support for a policy was a power resource for advocates in government, not a reason for policy initiatives. This tendency for executive branch officials to dominate the making of environmental foreign policy continued into the 1990s, although the major environmental groups were far better prepared and a much more extensive institutional framework existed for environmental policy. The same conclusion applies regarding ocean pollution policy in the 1970s.71

Important government officials may be “policy entrepreneurs” who back a policy partly because of their own political ambitions, and partly because they want to do the right thing (and, most of them probably hope, leave a legacy of doing so). For instance, Russell Train’s part in ocean pollution negotiations during the Nixon presidency seems to reflect this idea,72 as may Al Gore’s intimate involvement in shaping US environmental foreign policy over the years.73 Policy entrepreneurs in government use various levers of influence to advance their own preferences. Interest groups are largely excluded from policy-making and serve mainly as a power resource for state officials.

Interests and the State

Interest-based state-centric theory tends toward two distinct questions: What are the interests of the state, and what is the role of interests within the state? The first approach directs attention to state interests that exist apart from society, for instance in maximizing tax revenue, legitimacy, autonomy, or regime stability. The premise is that the state’s interests cannot be reduced to interests in society, such as group interests. The researcher’s task would be to identify state interests relevant to environmental policy, then to link those interests to specific environmental foreign policy. For instance, a state might want greater regulatory control over the energy sector for any of a number of reasons. (Perhaps the energy sector is influential enough in society to limit the state’s freedom of action, which

69. See Deudney 1990; and Deudney and Matthew 1999.
73. Harris 2001b, 195-97.
might help explain the shift in the US government’s climate change and energy policies under President George W. Bush, whose administration is permeated with people from traditional energy industries.) Involvement in international negotiations on global warming might provide the leverage needed to gain some regulatory authority over the energy sector, leverage that might not be possible to achieve against domestic resistance otherwise. Thus, for example, the Clinton administration tried to elicit support from powerful interests, such as the insurance industry and corporations seeking to market energy-efficient technologies, to promote its climate change policy goals. Success in this regard would in turn bolster the power of the government over the fossil-fuel energy sector.74

The second approach has received considerable interest in the general literature. It says that the foreign policy agencies have certain interests that they pursue in the foreign policy process. Hence foreign policy outcomes are explained as the product of bureaucratic bargaining and compromise over such things as budgets, staffing, jurisdiction, mission, and domain. Allison and Zelikow’s study of the Cuban Missile Crisis is the most famous example, inspiring many others. One of their models sees policies as “results of bargaining games.”75 Barnett76 asserts that the concept of environmental security has been used by agency actors to coopt environmental issues in order to perpetuate roles and the agencies’ traditional (Cold War) activities. Another study shows that poor bureaucratic organization has hindered the United States and Canada from implementing declared Great Lakes environmental policy.77

Ideas and Policy-making

How do ideas affect environmental foreign policy? Several approaches are possible. Parallel with work on foreign economic policy, scholars have argued that world views, principled beliefs, and causal beliefs held by policy-makers serve as road maps, contribute to achieving efficient outcomes in the absence of a unique equilibrium, and, when embedded in institutions, specify policy in the absence of innovation.78 Unfortunately, Goldstein and Keohane’s important book79 examining these forces discusses economics, colonialism, terrorism, and human rights, but it lacks a chapter on environmental policy.

Another line of thought investigates the role of science in shaping environmental foreign policy. Environmental policy depends on scientific research and evidence perhaps more than any other issue area. According to one observer, the “national basis of decision making” leads to “a powerful national

74. Harris 2001b, 172-178.
75. Allison and Zelikow 1999, 255.
identification to science and technology," and to tying scientific research "to the perspectives of a single country." Scientific uncertainty has been cited to help explain policy gridlock in the United States regarding global warming, and subsequently the failure of US leadership on the issue. Policy-makers generally turn to scientists for dispassionate analysis, but Spiller and Rieser, in a study of ocean dumping policy, assert that scientists bring non-scientific values to their interpretations of evidence, generally in line with their policy preferences. Susskind observes that scientists played important roles in the debate over ozone depletion, and he questions the usefulness of adversary science for developing effective environmental agreements (although these remarks are not part of a study of environmental foreign policy as such). Others have shown how “knowledge brokers” can utilize and manipulate scientific discourse, drawing their own conclusions from the work of scientists in order to mold environmental foreign policy so that it reflects their own political and economic interests. Our understanding of environmental foreign policy would benefit from more comparative research showing how science figures in the environmental foreign policies of various states, developed and developing, strong and weak, democratic and authoritarian, unitary and fragmented, and so forth.

Foreign policy studies give considerable attention to the psychology of leadership and small decision-making groups. Hypotheses on perception and misperception, groupthink, parochialism in the agencies, and the like are employed to account for a wide variety of foreign policy outcomes. Whether Woodrow Wilson’s projection of childhood conflicts onto the international screen, or groupthink in John Kennedy’s inner circle during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the way leaders think and perceive is seen as crucial to understanding a state’s foreign policy choices. Very little research on how such factors affect environmental foreign policy exists.

One fruitful approach that crosses the line between societal and state-centric theory is to investigate the role of societal groups in shaping policymakers’ values and even scientific understanding of environmental and resource issues. Harris notes that nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have used conferences and other activities to increase public awareness of environmental problems, and NGOs in the United States have been shown to play an important role in Congressional consideration of multilateral development bank policies. Although somewhat blurring the line between foreign policy studies as

85. Litfin 1993, 80-81; and see Litfin 1998.
87. See Harris 2001b, 190-199.
such and international relations, suggestive work on the role of NGOs in shaping the cognitive orientations of environmental policy-making is explored in Princen and Finger,90 Wapner91 and elsewhere. As noted above, the foreign policy argument of the epistemic community literature carries similar implications. Policy-makers facing a degree of uncertainty listen to and respond to the ideas made prominent in society by scientists and experts, NGOs, and other groups outside the state. To be sure, the proximate policy-makers are elected officials and those in the agencies, but the source of foreign policy remains fundamentally in the ideas circulating in society. As Henry Kissinger observed, “The convictions that leaders have formed before reaching high office are the intellectual capital they will consume as long as they continue in office”92 (including, presumably, Kissinger’s own disdain for international environmental issues!).

The role of ideas in shaping the environmental foreign policy choices of government officials remains a largely unexplored area. A few studies, with most attention to the role of science, are all that we have. Certainly, general international relations works often remark on the role of ideas, but these remarks are suggestive only. Few studies focus specifically on the question of policy-makers’ ideas and values, their worldviews, or even the flow of information within the agencies, to explain environmental foreign policy outcomes. We know of no studies that begin from the individual psychology of decision makers.

Conclusion

In this essay we have tried to start thinking systematically about theory in the context of environment and foreign policy. We can begin by thinking about the role of systemic and structural variables at the interstate level, forces and institutions at the level of society, and actors at the state level. We can supplement these categories with emphases on power, interests and ideas (see Figure 1). Different scholars have helped us highlight each of these aspects of foreign policy-making, and some have done so specifically in the context of environmental issues. We have tried to suggest how their work has increased our understanding, and we have highlighted some areas where more research is required. To be sure, no one theoretical approach will give a complete picture. The real world is too complex for that. But each approach, in its own way, can bring us closer to reality, and certainly can enhance our understanding of how foreign policy on the environment is made.

We can move a step further by combining different approaches, although the closer an approach gets us to reality the less parsimonious it often becomes. The utility of doing this is reflected in the work of Robert Putnam.93 While he does not seek to explain foreign policy per se, Putnam94 does show how events

can be understood by reference to “two-level games” in which state and society level actors (“domestic politics”) interact with those at the systemic (“international”) level. Thus, as Harrison\(^\text{95}\) shows in an analysis of US policy on global climate change, “For any issue that is the subject of international negotiations, the administration must calculate the relative influence of interested domestic political actors to determine the range of bargaining outcomes within which any international agreement must fall to achieve domestic ratification (or the ‘win-set’).” Putnam’s approach has been taken up by a number of scholars looking at environmental foreign policy.\(^\text{96}\) By focusing on more than one level of analysis, it demonstrates the interplay between domestic and international forces—and it shows how more than one approach, or an approach that is multifaceted, can illuminate environmental foreign policy.

What has our survey shown in regard to further research? Power-based systemic theory has yet to offer an explanation parallel to that in IPE for why a hegemon would prefer a given set of environmental policies and institutions over another. The power of elites in society to shape environmental foreign policy is often noted but rarely examined systematically or with an eye to theoretical debates. Examination of executive-legislative relations has yielded some studies, although differences of interpretation remain. Among interest-based approaches, the national interest model offers one of the most prominent studies, but much more empirical work remains to be done. The impact of interest groups has received perhaps the most attention. By contrast, one very important approach to foreign policy studies—bureaucratic politics—is nearly bereft of studies focusing on environmental policy, studies of EU politics notwithstanding. The role of ideas is an important part of the study of international environmental politics, and that research spills over into foreign policy studies. But cognitivist studies of environmental foreign policy as such are scarce. The state’s autonomous role has received some study (the work of Hopgood\(^\text{97}\) being the most prominent), but, as in all of these approaches, more empirical work and theoretical development is needed. Comparative work is limited for each approach.

This is not to criticize existing scholarship. To the contrary, the studies we do have point the way for further research. Many studies available to us now have lasting value for the development of the theory of environmental foreign policy. In general, the study of environmental foreign policy has only just begun, which is an opportunity for scholars.

Interestingly, one conclusion that can be drawn from this survey is that we perhaps ought to look back to the 1960s and 1970s for help in understanding contemporary and future problems of environmental change. Many scholars of international environmental relations followed the (American) trend of the 1980s by looking for simplicity in systemic theory, in the process rejecting much

\(^{95}\) Harrison 2000, 89.
\(^{96}\) For example, Sitaraman 2001; Kameyama forthcoming; and Ohta forthcoming.
\(^{97}\) Hopgood 1998.
of the detailed literature and theory derived from foreign policy analysis and comparative politics. Increasingly, scholars are returning to the rich, detailed forms of analyses of those earlier decades. They may thereby increase our understanding of the human, social and institutional forces shaping foreign policy, increasing our ability to aid policy-makers and stakeholders in understanding precisely the forces that shape environmental foreign policy and the collaborative efforts necessary to protect the world’s natural environment.

References


