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Article

Interstate order shaped by decision-makers' actions

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Abstract

International relations theories based on the structural paradigm have failed to explain the mechanism driving the changes observed in the interstate order across the Cold War, the post-Cold War and the current era of counter-globalization. This is because the structural paradigm ignores the impact of personal relationship between decision-makers on interstate relations. Furthermore, the structural paradigm cannot account for incidences when interstate order changes without structural change. To address the decision-maker paradigm's investigating the mechanism of interstate changes can improve modern IR theories' explanatory power. This paradigm provides explanations for changes occurring at both the individual and system levels that the structural paradigm cannot explain. This paper categorizes decision-makers according to the combined outcomes based on a dual-axes system of morality and capability, creating the following four ideal types: humane authority, hegemony, egalitarian, and paper-tiger. The mechanism of forming interstate order is the accumulation of actions by decision-makers. The propensity of the decision-makers toward an ideal type results in four different outcomes in the interstate order: norms-adoption, big-stick, noninterference, and terror-balance.

In 2025, the Donald Trump Administration severely disrupted the global order and much ink was spilled discussing the topic from either geopolitics or Trump's personality, which reminded me of the structure–agency debate in international relations (IR) studies.[1] In pondering this, I am confronted with the following theoretical questions: Is the structural analysis sufficient at explaining interstate changes or should we analyze the agent?[2] Are interstate relations shaped by states or the decision-makers who wield state power? Is the nature of interstate relations

[1] Alexander E. Wendt, "The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory," *International Organization*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (1987), pp. 335–70; Colin Wight, *Agents, Structures and International Relations: Politics as Ontology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Gil Friedman and Harvey Starr, *Agency, Structure, and International Politics: From Ontology to Empirical Inquiry* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Jarrod Hayes, "Agency and Structure in Foreign Policy," *Politics*, 28 August 2018, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.523.

[2] This paper uses "interstate" rather than "international" to describe the relations between ancient states as well as between nation states because the concept of "nation states" refers to nations which emerged in modern age and is inapplicable to ancient states as city states, monarchies, empires, etc. The term "interstate" can express the common character and deep nature shared by all kinds of states.

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national or personal? Do national interests drive strategy, or are they subverted by the privatized interests of decision-makers? Is the outcome of order formation decided by structural factors or decision-makers' actions? Are the political characteristics of interstate order enforced by norms or decision-makers' policies? These questions spurred me to write this paper. This does not deny the fact that there are structural constraints on decision-makers' actions, but to argue that the interstate order can be altered by decision-makers who overcome or ignore structural constraints.

Explanatory power of structural and decision-maker paradigm

In IR studies, the structure–agency debate centers on whether interstate relations are primarily shaped by structural factors or by decision-makers' choices. Structuralists believe that the decision-makers' actions are constrained by structural factors, such as geopolitics, balance of power, institutions, norms, culture, or class. However, those fond of the agency paradigm would argue that agents play a decisive role in IR. More popular than both structuralists and agent advocates, eclecticists assert that agents and structures are mutually dependent and co-constitutive factors. While the eclecticist's cognition of this issue may sound comprehensive, it fails to tease apart the interacting mechanisms of structures and agents in the shaping of interstate relations.

Historically, there is a phenomenon wherein interstate relations or behaviors of interstate actors often underwent changes while the structural environment remained the same. Presently, we have observed such examples play out multiple times in 2025. For instance, soon after Trump took over power from Joseph Biden, he levied tough tariffs against America's traditional allies in total opposition to Biden's policy, yet there had been no changes to the international structure.[3] India and Pakistan engaged in a 4-day skirmish in May of 2005.[4] India–Pakistan relations progressed from peace to war and then back to peace over the course of a week, while structural factors related to their bilateral relations remained the same. The interstate environment in late 2025 remained unchanged, yet Sino–Japanese relations deteriorated suddenly after Sanae Takaichi replaced Shigeru Ishida as the Japanese Prime Minister and adopted a hostile policy toward China.[5]

Where the structural paradigm fails to provide satisfying explanations for these events, the decision-maker paradigm offers an effective approach. Taking, for example, the India–Pakistan crisis: before May 7, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his assistants believed that India had absolute military superiority over Pakistan; thus, they initiated a strike, claiming they were attacking terrorists based at the Pakistan border. When several Indian fighter jets were shot down by the Pakistani air force in the following 4 days,[6] Indian decision-makers realized that they had underestimated Pakistan's military capability. Accordingly, they ended their military operation. This demonstrates that Indian decision-makers played the decisive role in both the occurrence and ending of this crisis.

Although structural factors do shape an environment that imposes constraints on agents, decision-makers are not guaranteed to act according to these constraints. They make decisions

[3] Richard Fontaine, "The Trump-Biden-Trump Foreign Policy," *Center for New American Security*, 20 January 2025, https://www.cnas.org/publications/commentary/the-trump-biden-trump-foreign-policy.

[4] Christopher Clary, "Four Days in May: The India-Pakistan Crisis of 2025," *Stimson Working Paper*, 28 May 2025, https://www.stimson.org/2025/four-days-in-may-the-india-pakistan-crisis-of-2025/.

[5] Jeff Kingston, "How Japan's Sanae Takaichi Torpedoed Ties with China," *Time*, 30 November 2025, https://time.com/7337322/japan-china-takaichi-spat-taiwan/.

[6] Billy Stockwell, "Indian Military Chief Acknowledges Loss of Fighter Jets in May Conflict with Pakistan," *CNN*, 31 May 2025, https://www.cnn.com/2025/05/31/asia/india-pakistan-kashmir-conflict-jets-intl.

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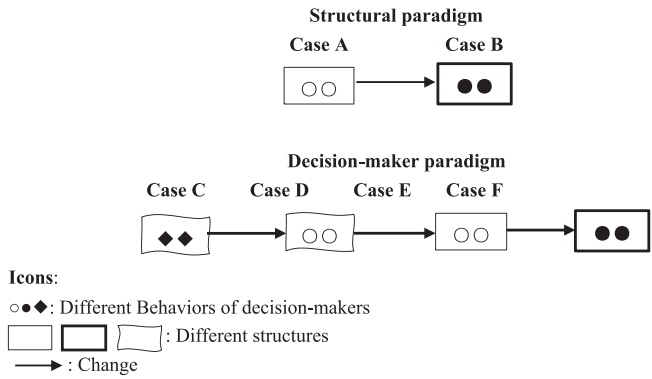


Figure 1 Structural Paradigm and Decision-Maker Paradigm.

according to their strategic preferences which are not necessarily constrained by structural factors.[7] Their preferences may be suboptimal for the decided goals due to personal bias. The above analysis of India–Pakistan crisis suggests that the decision-maker paradigm is more applicable than the structural paradigm for explaining why the same actors behave differently. When we compare the two paradigms, the decision-maker paradigm can explain a wider range of phenomena than the structural paradigm (see Figure 1).

The structural paradigm can explain why actors share similar behaviors under the same structural situation (as visualized within Cases A and B in Figure 1), but it cannot explain how different behaviors evolved under the same structural constraint (as visualized by the change from Case C to D). Two decades ago, Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollack said that if political scientists "do not attempt to explain the roles of either human error or personality in international relations, they cannot explain all of the variance in the affairs of nations."[8] For instance, structural analysts usually attribute the stable cooperation within the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) framework to US economic superiority over Canada and Mexico. Nevertheless, this paradigm cannot explain why Trump chose to impose high tariffs on these two countries, which differs from the decisions of previous American leaders. However, the decision-maker paradigm can explain how this came to be: Trump is fond of bullying allies and Biden respects allies.

The structural paradigm can explain why the same actors behave differently under different structural constraints (as visualized in the change from Case A to B), but it fails to explain why actors behave similarly under different structural constraints (as visualized in the change from Case D to E). For instance, the structuralist can attribute the US policy of supporting or opposing the Treaty on the Limitation of Anti-Ballistic Missile Systems to the transition of global power structure from bipolarity to unipolarity. But this paradigm cannot explain why US President Bill Clinton rejected the idea of withdrawing from the treaty in 1999,[9] but his successor George W. Bush authorized the withdrawal in 2002.[10] However, the global power structure remained the

[7] Yuxuan Jia and Zhao Huiyi, "Yan Xuetong Says Policy Makers Should be Placed at the Center of Theoretical Analysis in International Relations," *The East Is Read*, 25 October 2025, https://www.eastisread.com/p/yan-xuetong-says-policy-makers-should.

[8] Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack "Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In," *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (2001), p. 108.

[9] Jamestown Foundation, "Clinton Administration Offers Russia Inducements for Modifying ABM Treaty," 18 October 1999, https://jamestown.org/clinton-administration-offers-russia-inducements-for-modifying-abm-treaty/.

[10] Arms Control Association, "U.S. Withdrawal from the ABM Treaty: President Bush's Remarks and U.S. Diplomatic Notes," January 2002, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2002-01/us-withdrawal-abm-treaty-president-bushs-remarks-and-us-diplomatic-notes.

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same in the 4 years. The decision-maker paradigm attributes the different policies adopted by Clinton and Bush to the different importance that the two US presidents attached to strategic reputation. Clinton regarded interstate strategic reputation as an important national interest but Bush did not value it.

In addition, the decision-maker paradigm can explain how structural changes occur, while the structural paradigm cannot. As such, it is possible that structural changes emerge from the behavioral shifts, instead of the behavior changing in reaction to structural shifts. Robert Gilpin attributed three types of change in the interstate system to agent change. He classified three types of interstate changes: systems change, systematic change, and interaction change. Systems change (aka change to system types) results from a change in the nature of agents because the system character is defined by its most prominent agents. Systematic change (aka change to power structure within a given system) is caused by the rise and fall of the dominant agents. Interaction change (aka a change of norms in an interstate system) is the result of agents' efforts which accelerate or forestall changes in an interstate system.[11] For instance, a present example of interaction change is the transition from globalization (initiated by liberal decision-makers of Western states after the Cold War) to counter-globalization resulting from the decoupling and de-risking policies adopted by populist decision-makers of the same Western powers.[12]

Decision-makers rather than states as interstate actors

One of the reasons the structure–agency debate has lasted for decades in IR studies is the unclear conceptual usage of the word "state." The term sometimes refers to a political institution with an independent will and sometimes to a political instrument for governance. Since the United Nations (UN) was established in 1945, IR scholars have become accustomed to viewing nation-states as the major international actors and rarely give a second thought to the differences between the state and the decision-maker. Although names of UN member states are used as de facto replacements for decision-makers (actors), states are not in and of themselves actors. As Ludwig Wittgenstein, the German philosopher, had aptly noted, "Only facts can express a sense, a class of names cannot."[13] This section will look into the question of whether it is the state or the decision-maker who wields the state's power is the true actor in interstate relations.

Different conceptualizations about the state

Since the black-boxing of states prevailed in IR theoretical studies from the 1980s, many IR theories have viewed the state as the primary interstate actor. However, this view overlooked the fact that states, as all institutions, cannot function automatically without the decision-makers' operation. To determine whether foreign policies ought to be conceptualized as the state's actions or the decision-makers', one must clarify the concept of the state.

Both ancient and modern states are composed of three elements: people, territory, and government. Mencius (372–289 BCE) summarized the three components of the state as: "the territory, the people and the government" (zhuhou zhi bao san, tudi, renmin, zhengshi).[14]

[11] Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 39–41.

[12] René Cuperus, "The Populist Revolt against Globalization," *Clingendael*, 3 September 2017, https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2017/3/the-populist-revolt-against-globalisation/.

[13] Ludwig Wittgensitein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. Wang Pingfu (Peking: Jiuzhou Press, 2007), p. 58.

[14] Mencius, "Jin Xin Part II," *The Four Book*, trans. James Legge (Changsha: Hunan Publishing House, 1994), p. 547.

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Modern IR scholars share a similar view. Quincy Wright said, "A state in the modern sense implies a population occupying a definite territory, subject to a government which other states recognized as having some legal status."[15] The UN sovereignty doctrine led IR scholars to add sovereignty as a fourth component to nation-states alongside the original three.

As the concept of state changed over time, people developed different perceptions about the state. In ancient times, people viewed the state as an instrument owned by rulers, such as Emperors, Kings, Monarchs, and members of the aristocracy. This ownership includes the above-mentioned three components: land, population, and government. An examination of ancient literature shows that the rulers, rather than states, were seen as interstate actors. States had rarely been viewed as the actor until the 19th century, mainly due to states being the rulers' personal properties. Even in the late 19th century, state rulers regarded government bureaucrats, including ministers, as personal servants similar to royal chefs or tailors rather than public servants. In 1862, Czar Nicholas II asked Otto von Bismarck, who had just been appointed as the prime minister of Kingdom of Prussia, to join the Russian diplomatic service.[16] When discovering this event's public reporting at the time, Hans Morgenthau expressed surprise, saying, "Today such an offer would be regarded as an invitation to treason."[17] This demonstrates the disparity in modern and ancient conceptualizations of the "state."

At present, the popular perception of nation-states is as actors, with the state's sovereignty lying with its citizens. National leaders are tasked to wield the state's sovereignty in service of the people's interests. For instance, less than a year into Trump's second term, the United States experienced a historically large "No Kings" protest march across many cities.[18] This movement clearly indicated the American people's belief that the United States and its government belonged to them, and the Trump Administration does not have the right to use the US government as an instrument for personal gain.

In modern political science literature, "state" is often used as synonym for "government." This usage frames the state as an instrument used by the ruling class to repress the ruled class living within the state's borders for the sake of protecting the interests of the ruling class. Leninist scholars, especially, hold this view.[19] In this concept of state, national leaders are viewed as representatives of the ruling class and the state as a political apparatus held by them. As such, national leaders are actors but not the state.

From the perspective of interstate relations, this paper proposes that the state ought to be conceptualized as a political institution used by decision-makers to handle interstate affairs. Every state has a government which is merely a nonliving political tool. This conception of the government differs from Edmund Burke, a British political theorist, who regarded the government as a living thing.[20] As such, this paper distinguishes the decision-maker from the state and views the decision-maker as the interstate actor and the state as an institution designed to achieve the interests prioritized by those who control it.

Decision-makers operating the state

[15] Quincy Wright, *The Study of International Relations* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1955), p. 4.
[16] Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 7th Edition (New York: McGraw Hill Companies Inc, 2008), p. 254.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Grace Eliza Goodwin and Caitlin Wilson, "Millions Turned Out for Anti-Trump 'No Kings' Protests Across US," *BBC*, 19 October 2025, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c93xgyp1zv4o.
[19] J. Sykes, "Red Reviews: 'The State and Revolution'," *Fight Back News*, 1 May 2024, https://fightbacknews.org/articles/red-reviews-the-state-and-revolution.
[20] *The Little Political Book of Politics* (New York: Dorling Kindersley Limited, 2013), p. 77.

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Wittgenstein said, "In order to know an object, I must know not its external but all its internal qualities."[21] Examining the components making up the state, we can better understand why interstate actors are the decision-makers wielding state power rather than the state itself. Upon closer examination, we can see that land and sovereignty cannot act or move consciously because they are not living things. People have no power to decide a state's foreign policy. Thus people, land, and sovereignty are ruled out as interstate actors, leaving the government as the only active component of the state.

However, the government has no consciousness or intention and, like a set of Chinese lion props, it is the dancers hiding in it who make it move. The so-called "state actions" are actually the actions of decision-makers who wield state power. Some people may believe that foreign policies are made by governmental bureaucrats. However, this view is challenged by the fact that only very few individuals in both ancient and modern governments have the chance to make decisions about foreign policies. The bureaucrats in foreign affairs agencies are only responsible for implementing decisions made by top leaders and they are not decision-makers. Even legislators have no real power to make foreign policy. For instance, since the end of the Cold War, none of the American decision-makers have ever asked congress for authorization of their war decisions. The war in Afghanistan lasted for two decades without any approval by legislative bodies.

Decades ago, some IR scholars recognized the necessity of distinguishing decision-makers from states. Margaret Hermann et al. argued "who leads matters" in a state.[22] They were against the idea of viewing decision-makers as passive actors, emphasizing the decisive role of decision-makers in interstate relations. Recently, more IR theorists stressed the necessity to distinguish decision-makers from states. John Mearsheimer and Sebastian Rosato said, "It is this collection of individuals rather than the state itself that makes policy. A state's rationality thus depends on how the views of its key policymakers are aggregated."[23] Decision-makers have such decisive impacts on interstate relations that few would consider theoretical models explaining World War II without including Adolf Hitler, or the funding of the UN without Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR), or the end of the Cold War without Mikhail Gorbachev, or the counter-globalization without Trump. Some IR scholars even name wars with the names of decision-makers, such as "Bush's War" and "Obama's War."[24] Thus, it is evident that many IR scholars have already conceptualized the interstate actors as the decision-makers, even if only unconsciously or informally.

When interstate actors are formally defined as decision-makers rather than states or any institutions, it becomes easy to explain why changes in decision-makers are often followed by changes in bilateral relations between states. For instance, soon after replacing Justin Trudeau as the Prime Minister of Canada, Mark Carney abandoned Trudeau's anti-China policy and quickly resumed cooperation with China in 2026.[25] For another example, soon after replacing Rodrigo Roa Duterte as the Philippine President in May of 2022, Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos adopted policies that caused China–Philippine relations to deteriorate.[26]

[21] Wittgensitein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, p. 44.

[22] Margaret G. Hermann and others. "Who Leads Matters: The Effects of Powerful Individuals," *International Studies Review*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2001), pp. 83–131.

[23] John Mearsheimer and Sebastian Rosato, *How States Think: The Rationality of Foreign Policy* (London: Yale University Press, 2023), p. 6.

[24] Tom Engelhardt, *The American Way of War: How Bush's Wars became Obama's* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010).

[25] Dylan Robertson, "Carney's Canada-China Deals Are the Product of Months of Diplomatic Hustle," *St. Albert Gazette*, 16 January 2026, https://www.stalbertgazette.com/politics/carneys-canada-china-deals-are-the-product-of-months-of-diplomatic-hustle-11752248.

[26] Zhai Kun, "The Philippine Connection," *China-US Focus*, 1 February 2023, https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/the-philippine-connection.

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Personal relationship between decision-makers

Because it is the decision-maker who decides the foreign policy rather than the state, bilateral interstate relations are often more personal than most people realize and reflect much less of national relations than people assume. In both Asian and European history, marriage between ruling families was a popular strategy for consolidating the decision-makers' personal power, with which to form alliances, secure peace, or gain territory. Nowadays, bilateral relations between states are also often decided by personal relationship between the decision-makers of all kinds of states, whether they are democratic or authoritarian. For instance, the hospitality between Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong Un resulted in a summit between the two hostile Korean states in 2018.[27] A few years later, Yoon Suk Yeol's hostility toward Kim Jong Un drove North Korea to abandon the goal of reunification with South Korea in 2024.[28] The hostility between Putin and Volodymyr Zelenskyy escalated into the war between Russia and Ukraine in 2022.[29] The friendly personal relations between Trump and Putin eased the confrontation between the United States and Russia soon after Trump came back to the White House in 2025.

Trump openly made foreign policy decision according to his personal relationships. After he captured the Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, Zelenskyy suggested that the United States could capture Putin. Responding to the question of whether he should issue an order to capture Putin, Trump said, "Well, I don't think it's going to be necessary . . . I've always had a great relationship with him (Putin)."[30] Argentine President Javier Milei who follows in Trump's footsteps, asked Trump for economic help in October 2025 when his policy turned Argentina into an economic crisis. In return, Trump was explicit about the $20 billion economic support he gave to Argentina was conditional on Milei remaining in power.[31]

Interest privatization and policy goals

Both the structural paradigm and decision-maker paradigm assume that interests define the goals of foreign policy. The former assumes that national interests define policy goals, while the latter suggests that policy goals are defined by the decision-makers' prioritization of interests. In general, personal, regime, and national interests all impact the making of foreign policy. Which of them has the largest impact on setting policy goals depends on the decision-makers' prioritization of the three interests. If decision-makers put personal interests above national interests, then personal interests would define a state's foreign strategy goals rather than national interests.

Personal, regime, and national interests

When setting foreign policy goals, decision-makers have to consider how to weigh personal, regime, and national interests. When the three interests are consistent with each other, protecting national interests advances regime interests and decision-makers' personal interests, then decision-makers will not hesitate to adopt policies to protect national interests. However, when

[27] Michael Madden, "Koreas Summit: Five Key Moments from the Kim-Moon Meeting," *BBC*, 27 April 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-43920740.

[28] Oliver Slow, "North Korea's Kim Jong Un Abandons Unification Goal with South," *BBC News*, 16 January 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-67990948.

[29] Boldizsar Gyori, "Russia Issued Ultimatum to Ukraine in 2022 to Replace Zelensky with Medvedchuk, President Says," *The Kyiv Independent*, 22 January 2025, https://kyivindependent.com/russia-issued-ultimatum-in-2022-to-force-out-zelensky-install-medvedchuk-president-says/.

[30] Michael Dorgan, "Trump Discusses whether He'd Order a Mission to Capture Putin," *Fox News*, 10 January 2026, https://www.foxnews.com/world/trump-answers-whether-hed-order-mission-capture-putin.

[31] Kevin Liptak, "Trump Says Argentina Bailout Contingent on His Political Ally Milei Remaining in Power," *CNN*, 15 October 2025, https://www.cnn.com/2025/10/14/politics/javier-milei-president-trump-argentina.

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the interests are in conflict, decision-makers will prioritize the interest based on their personal preferences.

As mentioned in previous sections, decision-makers of ancient states regarded foreign relations as personal affairs between rulers or ruling families; therefore, personal interests served as the motivation driving foreign policy. It was normal for ancient rulers to put personal interests above regime interests and regime interests above national interests. For instance, in 1884, Empress Dowager Cixi of the Chinese Qing Dynasty embezzled funds designated for the navy, reallocating an estimated over 26 metric tons of silver to the restoration of the Summer Palace for her 60th birthday celebration.[32] Many people assume that decision-makers of nation states differ from ancient rulers and that they adopt foreign policies according to national interests because they are elected by people with whom they share the same interests. However, this assumption does not conform to the reality. There are endless number of cases showing that decision-makers of nation states adopt foreign policies according to their personal interests instead of regime or national interests. For instance, driven by the ambition to become the greatest American president, Trump initiated the war for regime change in Iran in March 2026. The majority of Americans opposed the war because they do not think the war is in the favor of American national interests. The Columbia Broadcasting System's survey of nearly 1400 American adults found that more than 60% doubted Trump's claim that the war protects national interests.[33] It would be impossible for those who prioritize personal interests over national interest to concern themselves with their allies' interests.

Among all the personal interests the decision-makers have, the impetus to protect personal power has the strongest impact on policy goals. For instance, despite knowing that continuously waging war is isolating Israel internationally, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu insisted on waging wars against other Middle Eastern countries for the sake of maintaining his position as Prime Minister in 2025.[34] Former US President Clinton said, "Netanyahu has long wanted to fight Iran because that way he can stay in office forever and ever. I mean, he's been there most of the last 20 years,"[35] Netanyahu is not an exception. Biden's policy toward Netanyahu was also driven by concern for his personal power. Knowing that providing military aid to Netanyahu for the killing of Palestinian children and women in Gaza would damage the US's international reputation, Biden reportedly cursed Netanyahu privately.[36] However, in order to gain Jewish votes in the 2024 election, he still continued military aid to Netanyahu.[37]

Decision-makers vary in terms of their prioritization of personal, regime, and national interests. They set different policy goals under the same structural constraints because they have different prioritizations of the interests. In general, decision-makers' personal power is deeply imbedded in regime security; therefore, most decision-makers prioritize regime interests over the other two interests. Among those who consider regime interests as the most important, some lean toward personal interests and others tilt toward national interests. Extremely selfish

[32] Marcello Arrambide, "A Historical Look at China's Imperial Summer Palace," *We Blog the World*, 16 May 2017, https://weblogtheworld.com/formats/photos/imperial-summer-palace-china-masterpiece-historical-landscape-garden-design.

[33] Chantelle Lee and Miranda Jeyaretnam, "How Americans Feel About Trump's War with Iran, according to the Latest Polls," *Time*, 4 March 2026, https://time.com/7382231/iran-us-israel-war-support-polling-trump-republicans-democrats/.

[34] Marium Ali and Alia Chughtai, "Maps: Israel Has Attacked Six Countries in the Past 72 Hours," *Al Jazeera*, 10 September 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/9/10/maps-israel-has-attacked-six-countries-in-the-past-72-hours.

[35] "Netanyahu Using Iran War to Stay in Power 'Forever': Former US President Clinton," *Arab News*, 21 June 2025, https://www.arabnews.com/node/2605262/world.

[36] CarolE.Lee and others, "Biden Disparages Netanyahu in Personal but Hasn't Significantly Changed U.S. Policy toward Israel and Gaza," *NBC News*, 12 February 2024, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/investigations/biden-disparages-netanyahu-personal-hasnt-changed-us-policy-israel-rcna138282.

[37] BrankoMarcetic, "An Untold History of Joe Biden's Support for Israel," *In These Times*, 24 July 2024, https://inthesetimes.com/article/biden-netanyahu-israel-harris-zionism-gaza.

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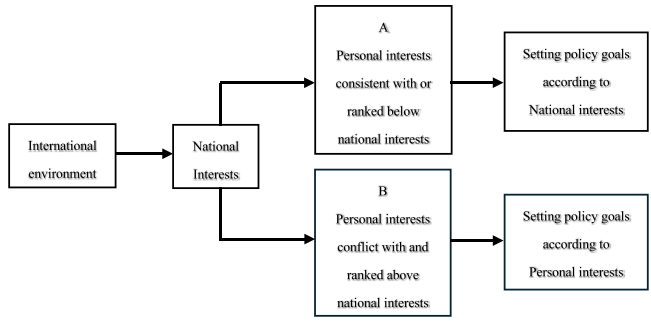


Figure 2 Interest Prioritization Leading to Policy Goals.

decision-makers will prioritize their personal interests over both regime and national interests. This kind of decision-makers is not at all rare historically. Rarely seen in history are those who place national interests in the top priority, regardless of their personal situation.

Among US national leaders, George Washington's decision to give up presidency after one term (a historical rarity) could be seen as an act of prioritizing national interests over personal interests.[38] Decisions of G. W. Bush and Barack Obama seem to fall in line with the majority who prioritize regime interests. Bush seems to lean toward prioritizing more personal interests while Obama more toward national interests. Trump's decisions are typical of someone prioritizing personal interests in policy-making. Extremely selfish decision-makers are not bound by cultural limitations they are universal across all civilizations. In modern Chinese history, one of many such decision-makers was Yuan Shikai, the first formal president of the Republic of China (1912), who reinstated the imperial political system briefly. Another figure was Puyi, the last emperor (1908–11/12) of the Qing Dynasty. Imperial Japan made him a puppet ruler of Manchukuo (1934–45). Following Puyi's footsteps were Wang Jingwei, the president of the Japan's puppet National Government of the Republic of China.

Although this paper argues that different interests prioritized by decision-makers lead to different policy goals under the same structural constraints, this is not a denial of the impact of structural factors on policy goals. Structural factors objectively define national interests, but objective national interests do not translate directly into policy goals. The goals are still chosen by decision-makers based on how they prioritize those interests. This potentiates two scenarios in which decision-makers could set policy goals according to national interests as defined by structural factors. In one scenario, the decision-makers' personal interests are congruent with national interests; thus, the decision-makers benefit from protecting or maximizing national interests and will wield state powers to forward those interests. In the other scenario, the decision-makers' personal interests are in conflict with national interests; however, the decision-makers nonetheless prioritize national interests over their personal interests (see Figure 2A).

However, if decision-makers prioritize their personal interests over national interests, then structural factors usually fail to constrain the decision-makers' personal interest when they conflict with national ones. In this case, the decision-makers' personal interests act like a filter, preventing national interests from becoming policy goals (see Figure 2B). For instance, Takaichi provoked China on the Taiwan issue to consolidate her domestic power at the price of undermining Japan's economic interests in China.[39] During the first month of her term as the

[38] Richard C. Stazesky, "George Washington, Genius in Leadership," *Washington Papers*, 22 February 2000, https://washingtonpapers.org/resources/articles/george-washington-genius-in-leadership/.

[39] Bonnie Williamson, "What's Behind Japan's Provocation of China?" *China Daily*, 26 November 2025, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202511/26/WS69264eb9a310d6866eb2b5fa.html.

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prime minister, Takaichi stated that a military conflict over Taiwan could be "a situation that threatens Japan's survival," implying that Japanese troops will interfere with China's unification of Taiwan.[40] This forced the Chinese government to impose both diplomatic and economic sanctions on Japan, demanding that she retracts the remarks.[41] For the sake of consolidating domestic support, she refused Beijing's demand.

Decision-makers' ambition and disasters

In most cases, decision-makers do not prioritize their personal economic interests because they can legitimately control and use national economic resources. Instead, it is personal political ambitions that are often prioritized by decision-makers when setting national goals, which is likely to lead to strategic disaster. Xunzi (ca. 313–238 BCE) said, "If the ruler is found of achievement, then the country will be poor"[42] (Shang hao gong, ze guo pin). Many modern IR scholars echo this sentiment, attributing the decline of empires to their over extension, arguing that excessive territory, military, and wealth will become too burdensome to manage, becoming a drain on an empire's resources, eventually leading to its downfall.[43] The Roman Empire and British Empire are often regarded as two typical examples. However, this school of thought attributes the decline of empires to the strategies themselves rather than the decision-makers who adopted these strategies. Those who adopted overcommitted strategies usually do so out of desire for personal glory and leave their names in the annals of history.

There is a well-known Chinese example in the West Han Dynasty, illustrating the type of disasters a leaders' ambition can bring about. Emperor Wen of Han, Liu Heng, reigned for 23 years (180–157 BCE), his son, Emperor Jing of Han, Liu Qi, ran the state for 16 years (157–141 BCE), and his grandson, Emperor Wu of Han, Liu Che, stayed in power for 54 years (141–87 BCE). Emperor Wen and Emperor Jing had no hegemonic ambition, focusing their policies on domestic affairs and avoiding wars with hostile neighbors. Under their governance, the Han Dynasty became prosperous and strong.[44] Their governance is hailed as the "enlightened administration of Wen and Jing" (Wen Jing zhi zhi) in Chinese history. In contrast, Emperor Wu had the ambition to establish his state as the hegemon after he inherited the throne. He frequently waged wars to expand Han's territory.[45] While the territory expanded under his reign, his policy led to the loss of about 20% of the population and severe economic recession.[46] Faced with the social disaster, in 89 BCE, he issued an imperial edict, known as Luntai Edict (*Luntai Zhao*), admitting it was his strategic mistake.[47] Sima Guang, a historian in the Han Dynasty, attributed Emperor Wu's public mea culpa as the key factor preventing the Han Empire from collapsing as the Qin Empire, the previous dynasty, did.[48]

Today, Trump has repeatedly expressed his aspiration to become the greatest American President. He often compares his potential legacy to those of historical figures like George

[40] Mike Mochizuki, "Takaichi 101: How to Torpedo Relations with China in a Month," *Responsible Statecraft*, 26 November 2025, https://responsiblestatecraft.org/japan-china-taiwan/.

[41] Jeff Kingston, "How Japan's Sanae Takaichi Torpedoed Ties with China," *Time*, 30 November 2025, https://time.com/7337322/japan-china-takaichi-spat-taiwan/.

[42] Xun Kuang, "On Enriching the State," in *Xunzi I*, trans. John Knoblock (Changsha: Human People's Publishing House, 1999), p. 303.

[43] Walter Pippman, *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1943), pp. 7–8; Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987), p. 515; Charles A. Kupchan, *The Vulnerability of Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 7.

[44] Sima Guang, "Han Ji 8" (Record of Han Dynasty 8), in *Zi Zhi Tong Jian* (History as a Mirror) (Huangshan: Huangshan Press, 1997), p. 192.

[45] Sima Guang, "Han Ji 14" (Record of Han Dynasty 14), in *Zi Zhi Tong Jian*, p. 265.

[46] Ibid., p. 265.

[47] Ibid., pp. 264, 265, 267.

[48] Ibid., p. 267.

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Washington and Abraham Lincoln.[49] He also suggested that his Board of Peace might replace the UN,[50] a historical achievement that would be comparable to FDR's establishing of the UN. However, the American people seem to oppose his ambition. Colombia professor Howard French said, "Trump seems most comfortable in his role as the nation's ultimate foreign-policy czar. He appears to relish coming to his own understanding of the issues and interests in play, even when it is wrongheaded or woefully oversimplified. And with nearly every major diplomatic decision, he seems to follow his own transactional view of human affairs and trusts his instincts as the surest source of wisdom and policy guidance."[51] Harvard professor Kellerman said, "The presidency of Donald Trump—judged by many, including professional historians, to be one of the worst in American history."[52] Additionally, American media ranked Trump as the worst US president.[53]

Anemocratic decision-makers as order disruptors

While this paper stresses the decision-makers' role in shaping interstate relations, it differs from the Great Man Theory (GMT) espoused by Thomas Carlyle in the 19th century.[54] The GMT claims that history is created by heroic leaders while this paper argues that interstate relations are shaped by both the winners and losers. Furthermore, the winners and losers share a symbiotic relationship. Guan Zhong (?-645 BCE), the Prime Minister of Qi, said, "When your own state is well governed but the sovereigns of neighboring states are unworthy, it will be a great advantage for establishing a great power, because both the survival and dying out of a state is deeply related with its neighboring states."[55] However, the number of losers vastly outnumbers winners and they affect history as much as the winner's decision-makers, if not more. The decision-maker paradigm developed in this paper gives equal weight to victors and losers, order shapers, and disrupters, as well as interstate leaders and followers.

History has witnessed more chaotic than peaceful interstate orders, which suggests that state power is more often than not held by anemocratic leaders (昏君 *hunjun*). So, it is necessary for IR scholars to study the role of anemocratic leadership in interstate relations. Although they often disrupt the interstate order, anemocratic leaders still have followers in interstate relations. Barbara Kellerman said, "bad leadership and its conjoined twin, bad followership, are as ubiquitous as they are pernicious."[56] For instance, Trump established the Board of Peace, a private club, for overseeing the investment in Gaza, denying Palestinians' right to establish their own state. He appointed himself as the permanent chairman with his son-in-law Jared Kushner running this agency. Yet, despite the oppression against the Palestinians, the Board of Peace's

[49] Rachel Cohen, "Trump Left 'Extremely Angry' after Rated as 'Third Best' U.S. President," *Yahoo News*, 22 October 2025, https://www.yahoo.com/news/articles/trump-left-extremely-angry-rated-183851281.html.

[50] Jennifer Hansler and Kylie Atwood, "Trump Says Board of Peace Established to Oversee Reconstruction of Gaza 'Might' Replace the United Nations," *CNN*, 21 January 2026, https://www.cnn.com/2026/01/20/politics/trump-gaza-board-of-peace-united-nations.

[51] Howard W. French, "Trump's Favorite Role? Foreign-Policy Czar," *Foreign Policy*, 2 December 2025, https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/12/02/trump-foreign-policy-us-ukraine-peace-plan/.

[52] Barbara Kellerman, *Leadership from Bad to Worse: What Happens When Bad Festers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), p. 3.

[53] Martin Pengelly, "Trump Ranked as Worst US President in History, with Biden 14th Greatest," *The Guardian*, 21 February 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/feb/20/presidents-ranking-trump-biden-list.

[54] Thomas Carlyle, "The Hero as Divinity," in Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (London: James Fraser, 1840), pp. 1–50; E. D. Hirsch Jr., Joseph F. Kett, and James Trefil, *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, 3rd Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002); Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (New York: Fredrick A. Stokes & Brother, 1888), p. 2.

[55] *Guanzi II*, trans. Zhai Jianyue (Guilin: Guanxi Normal University Press, 2005), pp. 585, 587.

[56] Kellerman, *Leadership from Bad to Worse*, p. 1.

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establishing ceremony was still attended by top officials from 19 countries,[57] many of whom are from Muslim-majority states and some from populist governments.[58]

Max Weber's definition of a charismatic leadership solely refers to an individual with a superior capability to mobilize followers.[59] In contrast, this paper defines anemoractic leadership as an irresponisble one that leads its followers, both domestically and internationally, to disastrous outcomes.[60] Policy adopted by anemocratic decision-makers increases uncertainty, which in turn leads to chaos in the interstate system. Netanyahu is a typical case. There have been no effective means to prevent anemocratic leadership from coming to power. Thus, possibility of interstate orders being disrupted frequently by anemocratic decision-makers is more likely than not.

Anemocratic decision-makers always prioritize their personal interests over national interests regarding foreign policy, which is the main reason when they disrupt interstate order. Their personal power is mainly contingent on domestic situations rather than interstate structure, as such they are hyper sensitive toward any domestic threat to their personal power. Brian Rathbun et al. found that the individuals with a pro-self and low cognition of social reality are more impulsive and less likely to be constrained by norms compared to other personality profiles,[61] which also happen to be the personality profile of the anemocratic leader. The domestic situation generally changes more frequently than interstate structure, therefore, anemocratic decision-makers' policy goals are also likely to vacillate accordingly. This renders their foreign policy unpredictable, increasing the uncertainty of relations between their country with others. When anemocratic decision-makers come into office in leading powers, they often bring about interstate disorder and historical retrogression. An example of such retrogression can be observed in the period of 2017–25 when global trends translated from globalization to counter-globalization.[62]

The other reason anemocratic decision-makers disrupt interstate order is that they often adopt self-defeating policies. In general, people do not expect others to adopt policies that are harmful toward one's own national interest. When anemocratic decision-makers adopt policies that serve their personal interests at the cost of national interests, it goes against expectation. For instance, in order to achieve his goal of becoming the greatest US president, Trump planned to annex Greenland and acquire Canada as the 51st state for the United States. Even American strategists were taken by surprise at the announcement, let alone the Europeans and Canadians. Stephen Walt said, "[Trump] has openly and repeatedly proclaimed expansionist aims toward Canada, Greenland/Denmark, and Panama, and his ambitions may not stop there. [. . .] he has made it impossible for other societies to see the United States as a stable, well-regulated

[57] The other 19 countries are Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Morocco, Turkey, Kosovo, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Indonesia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Mongolia, Argentine, and Paraguay.

[58] Magdalena Del Valle and Hadriana Lowenkron, "Trump Launches Board of Peace but Many Allies Have Reservations," *Financial Review*, 23 January 2026, https://www.afr.com/world/middle-east/trump-launches-board-of-peace-but-many-allies-say-no-20260122-p5nwdn.

[59] Max Weber, *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1947), pp. 325–8.

[60] Yan Xuetong, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 45.

[61] Brian C. Rathbun, Joshua D. Kertzer, and Mark Paradis, "Homo Diplomaticus: Mixed-Method Evidence of Variation in Strategic Rationality," *International Organization*, Vol. 71, No. S1 (2017), pp. S46–S47.

[62] Josh Bivens and Adam S. Hersh, "The U.S. Approach to Globalization Has Gone from Bad to Worse under Trump: How to Construct a Progressive Policy Agenda Instead," *Economic Policy Institute*, 29 May 2025, https://www.epi.org/publication/the-u-s-approach-to-globalization-has-gone-from-bad-to-worse-under-trump-how-to-construct-a-progressive-policy-agenda-instead/; Jorge Castañeda, "Poor Leadership Makes Bad Globalization," *The Korea Times*, 27 July 2016, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/opinion/20160727/poor-leadership-makes-bad-globalization.

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society or to view his foreign-policy actions as an aberration. Both at home and abroad, in short, the US government is acting like a dangerous bully and a compulsive predator."[63]

Decision-makers and formation of interstate orders

The interactions between decision-makers of two states shape bilateral relations while the combination of interactions among decision-makers of all relevant states shape the order of a given interstate system. Although the decision-makers of major powers have more impact on the shaping of the interstate order than those of middle and small powers, the order is nevertheless shaped by both the strong and the weak.[64] Within some regions, all countries are of comparable strength so that regional orders are shaped by the majority of states rather than a few strong powers. To understand the mechanism of forming interstate orders, one must study the formation of both global and regional orders.

The mechanism of interstate order formation

Modern behavioral IR studies on the process of decision-making have advanced our understanding of the causes and consequences of behavioral heterogeneity in decision-makers.[65] This approach focuses on questions of why decision-makers adopt different policies under the same structural constraints or how differing personality traits affect decision-makers' policies. Emilie Hafner-Burton et al. believed that recent IR behavioral approaches can answer the question "how decision making might affect political outcomes."[66] Robert Powell suggested analyzing political decision-maker's behavior using a quasi-behavioral approach, in which a group of decision-makers is treated as a unitary actor.[67] However, he also noted that the challenge to this approach is the tenuous assumption that the unitary actor reflects the group adequately. Yet, Brian Rathbun et al. demonstrated that the average behavior of like-minded individuals in a group showed statistically significant behavioral differences from groups composed of individuals possessing other personality types, which supports the assumption that quasi-behavioral approach is not without merit.[68] Believing that analyzing decision-makers can help to develop IR theories, Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollack proposed 13 hypotheses for the variable of decision-makers in IR theoretical studies.[69]

Based on the insights from behavioral IR research methodology, the decision-maker paradigm developed in this paper takes this a step further. By treating decision-makers as unitary actors this paper proposes to classify decision-makers into ideal types. From this, these actors' actions accumulate into an interstate order, offering an explanation of how the decision-maker's behavioral profile translates into changes at the system level. That is to say, decision-makers' type is an independent input into the adoption mechanism, which acts as a metaphorical algorithm that outputs the final interstate order. This mechanism is visually modeled in Figure 3.

[63] Stephen M. Walt, "The Balance-of-Power Theory Strikes Again," *Foreign Policy*, 23 January 2026, https://foreignpolicy.com/2026/01/23/trump-threats-europe-greenland-balance-power/.

[64] Tommy S. H. Chai, "Rethinking East Asia's Historical Order: Heterachy in China-Southeast Asia Relations," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (2025), p. 246.

[65] Emilie M. Hafner-Burton and others, "The Behavioral Revolution and International Relations," *International Organization*, Vol. 71, No. S1 (2017), pp. S1–S31.

[66] Ibid., p. S2.

[67] Robert Powell, "Research Bets and Behavioral IR," *International Organization*, Vol. 71, No. S1 (2017), pp. S265–S266.

[68] Rathbun, Kertzer, and Paradis, "Homo Diplomaticus," p. S46.

[69] Byman and Pollack, "Let Us Now Praise Great Men," pp. 134–44.

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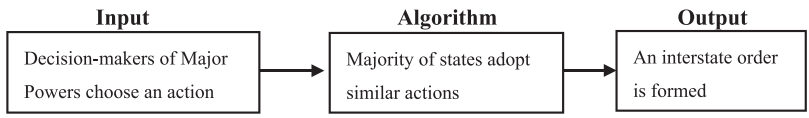


Figure 3 Mechanism of Interstate Order Formation.

Types of decision-makers

This paper categorizes decision-makers based on observable indicators signaling prioritization of interest and the success or lack thereof in the maintenance of peaceful relations with other states. English philosopher, Jeremy Bentham believed that the core of morality is creating happiness and avoiding misery, thus the measure of moral decision is one that produces happiness for the majority.[70] Using Bentham's criteria, this paper suggests that adoption of policies which prioritize national interests is used to categorize decision-makers as moral while adoption of policies at the cost of national interests would categorize the decision-maker as immoral. This is because policies that harm national interest and violates international norms lead to the least amount of happiness for the majority. In situations where adhering to international norms hurts national interest or violating international norms protects national interests, the balance of maximal happiness is difficult to assess, thus decision-makers who adopt these policies are categorized as moral.

Furthermore, the adoption of diplomatic solutions is categorized as competent, while the use of military coercion is categorized as incompetent. The reasoning is that, in interstate relations, diplomatic solutions preserve the maximal number of human lives while war trades human lives for political gains. Ergo, those who are able to best leverage the diplomatic solutions are seen as competent while those who resort to military operations are seen as incompetent. During the presidential campaign in 2024, J. D. Vance, as the vice presidential nominee, said, "All of the really terrible world conflicts, they almost always come from incompetent leadership."[71] Ironically, Trump proved this true in his war against Iran under the pretext of preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons in February 2026. Instead of coercing the Iranian government to give up its nuclear programs, the war instead drove the Iranian government to refuse any negotiation with the United States.[72]

Therefore, following from the criteria explained above, decision-makers can be categorized into four ideal types: humane authority, hegemony, egalitarian, and paper-tiger (see Table 1).

This classification is the further refinement of the categories of interstate leadership that I have written about in *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*.[73] Unlike before, these categories encompass decision-makers of both interstate leaders and followers. Being the decision-maker of a state does not preclude one from being an interstate follower, as seen in the instance of the UK. The UK has been one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, but their decision-makers have voted in lockstep with their American counterparts in most decisions of the Security Council since the establishment of the UN.

Among the four ideal types of decision-makers in Table 1, humane authority and egalitarian decision-makers display a preference for following interstate norms while hegemonic and paper-tiger decision-makers do not. Although decision-making elites differ from the masses, there is no reason to believe that they are behaviorally exceptional or less influenced by

[70] *The Little Political Book of Politics*, pp. 86–7.
[71] "Vence in 2024," *Home of the Brave, YouTube*, 11 March 2026, https://www.youtube.com/shorts/TDRhnHBXWWY.
[72] "'No Negotiations'—Iran Rejects Talks, Accuses US of Undermining Diplomacy," *The Palestine Chronicle*, 2 March 2026, https://www.palestinechronicle.com/no-negotiations-iran-rejects-talks-accuses-us-of-undermining-diplomacy/.
[73] Yan, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*, p. 43.

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Table 1 Types of Decision-Makers According to Morality and Capability

		Morality	
		Moral	**Immoral**
Capability	**Competent**	Moral and competent (humane authority)	Immoral and competent (hegemony)
	Incompetent	Moral and incompetent (egalitarian)	Immoral and incompetent (paper-tiger)

personal interests than obligations to international norms. Instead Burcu Bayram's research into Germany policy-makers' psychological profile showed that about 53% of respondents to his questionnaire have weak sense of obligation toward international law, 28% have moderate sense, and 19% have a strong sense.[74] This type of distribution is echoed in the historical phenomenon wherein hegemonic and big-stick decision-makers who do not respect interstate norms accounted for the majority while egalitarian decision-makers are few and humane authority are even fewer. Of course, some decision-makers may be a mixture of characteristics from two ideal types, but it is unlikely the distribution is perfectly equal. In practice, the modal mean of behavioral indicators would lean toward one ideal type.

Order formation with and without leadership

Global orders are mainly shaped by decision-makers of major powers, but that fact does not mean an interstate leadership is the necessary condition for forming an order in a given interstate system, especially in the case of regional orders. Interstate orders, both global and regional, can be formed and maintained with or without interstate leadership. Nonhuman social animals have developed various social mechanisms to maintain social order. For example, in gregarious species such as schooling fish or flocking birds, complex evasive movement patterns emerge without the need for an existing leading individual. These types of emergent properties are well documented in animal sociality studies.[75] Qin Yaqing suggests that the leaderless order (which he termed "relational order") is generated from the bottom-up and complex.[76] However, we must keep in mind that interstate orders are shaped by decision-makers of states. Therefore, the mechanism of forming an interstate order is not fully analogous to the emergence of movement patterns in flocks of birds or schools of fish. The direction in which leaderless orders form cannot be determined and its rules need not be complex. For instance, following one simple principle of "maintain a fixed distance with one's neighbor" is enough to allow large flocks of audiences exit in an orderly fashion from a stadium. Similarly, when decision-makers in a given interstate system follow the rule of "peaceful coexistence," the system's order is maintained.

Because the interstate system is anarchic, most interstate orders are formed and maintained without leadership. IR scholars widely agreed that the European order in the late 19th century

[74] A. Burcu Byaram, "Due Deference: Cosmopolitan Social Identity and the Psychology of Legal Obligation in International Politics," *International Organization*, Vol. 71, No. S1 (2017), p. S150.

[75] Chris W. Johnson, "What Are Emergent Properties and How Do They Affect the Engineering of Complex Systems?" *Reliability Engineering & System Safety*, Vol. 91, No. 12 (2006), pp. 1475–81.

[76] Yangqin Qin, "Relational Order, Harmonizing Power and Effective Leadership," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2026), p. 65.

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Table 2 Ideal Types of Interstate Orders

		Mutual respect	
		With	**Without**
Leadership	**With**	Norms-adoption (humane authority)	Big-stick (hegemony)
	Without	Noninterference (egalitarian)	Terror-balance (paper-tiger)

is a leaderless regional order. During this period, the decision-makers of major European states maintained a peace between them through a complex system of alliances. They formed defensive alliances, such as the League of the Three Emperors, among Germany, Austria, and Russia. This order was maintained through the "balance of power," which ensured European peace for nearly two decades. Looking into the Cold War order, we can find there is no leadership at global level but the two political camps were led by the American and Soviet leaders. Thus, the order of each bloc was leader-based but the global system was leaderless. That global order was maintained through the threat of mutually assured destruction (MAD) via nuclear weapons between the two superpowers.[77]

Ideal types of interstate order formation

Interstate orders are shaped by the interactions of decision-makers from relevant states. Therefore, the mechanism of forming an interstate order is the convergence of actions taken by a majority of the decision-makers within an interstate system. The previous section categorized ideal types of decision-makers according to the combination of their morality and capability. The decision-makers of differing ideal types would take differing actions under a similar structural constraint. When a majority of decision-makers constrain their behavior according to the same international norms, an interstate order is formed. There are four outcome ideal types of the interstate order resulting from the actions taken by decision-makers of different ideal types. As illustrated in Table 2, the four ideal types are distributed across two axes: respect for sovereignty and existence of leadership (both of which varies from with to without). Of the four ideal orders, two are leader-based, and the other two are leaderless.

A norms-adoption order emerges when the leadership of a humane authority is present. The leading decision-makers in this system establish a norm of respecting other's sovereignty. By setting an example, the leader inspires decision-makers in other states to adopt the norms. The enforcement of these norms is through psychological inspiration and reinforced via superior comprehensive power. This reinforcement is through a series of rewards and punishments. This is the most desirable among the four ideal types but rare because decision-makers who can be classified as human authorities are uncommon. The UN Charter—the brainchild of FDR, whom this paper classifies as a humane authority—is a modern example of this ideal type. Article 2 of the UN Charter emphasizes the prohibition of threat or use of force in IR, also known as

[77] Jasen Castillo, "The Cold Comfort of Mutually Assured Destruction," *War on The Rocks*, 16 June 2021, https://warontherocks.com/2021/06/revolutionary-thinking-questioning-the-conventional-wisdom-on-nuclear-deterrence/.

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noninterference in national sovereignty.[78] The Cold War order that formed after FDR's death by the hegemonic decision-makers did not meet FDR's vision nor follow his principles.

A big-stick order emerges when hegemonic leadership wields its superior military power to force other states to meet its demands with no respect for others' sovereignty. The big-stick order is popularly seen in history, such as the tributary system and the colonial system. The former is often used to describe the ancient regional orders in East Asia[79] and the latter is seen as the orders established by the European powers' expansion in the 18th and 19th centuries. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the H. W. Bush Administration enforced a global order through this approach with the United States as the only superpower.[80] Similarities between the US-led post-Cold War order and the Chinese tributary system have been noted by Yuen Foong Khong, who believes that order is now waning.[81]

A noninterference order arises from the egalitarian decision-makers whose policies respect others' sovereignty, and they account for the majority of the decision-makers in a given interstate system. This type of order is often observed in systems occupied by middle and small states, who voluntarily follow the principle of peaceful coexistence. They display no ambition to obtain superiority over their neighbors and show readiness to negotiate trade-offs with each other over disputes. Currently, this type of order exists among Pacific island states, Caribbean states, Southern African states, East African states, and also between the EU members. Laozi (ca. 571–471 BCE) advocated for this type of order, saying, "In a small state with few people let there be weapons for tens and hundreds, but they shall not be used ... Neighboring states will look across at one another, calls of chickens and dogs will reply to one another. The people will reach old age and die, but not communicate with each other."[82] This type of order is vulnerable to disruptions by anemocratic decision-makers and has never emerged as a modern global order.

A terror-balance order emerges in a given system when paper-tiger decision-makers adopt policies based on the fear of retaliation. Paper-tiger decision-makers would obtain material interests or superiority over other states through military means if the opportunities arise. Else, when they are relatively equal in power to their rivals, they constrain themselves from violating others' sovereignty to avoid the risk of regime change. This type of order is fragile and often undermined when military conflicts are initiated by anemocratic decision-makers who seek to strengthen their regime or expand their influence via military might. The Cold War order was a typical case of the terror-balance ideal type. While it is a generally peaceful order, it is plagued by frequent occurrences of proxy wars. Presently, there are several regional orders of this type, such as those among South Caucasus states, Middle Eastern states, West Africa states, and Central Africa states.

Interstate orders may not always perfectly fit into one of the four ideal types as described above. Instead, some of them rest somewhere between two ideal types with skew toward a particular type. For instance, the regional order in South Asia is a mixture of the big-stick and noninterference ideal types, where India is a regional hegemon whose decision-makers use their military might to impose their will upon their egalitarian neighbors. Another example is the regional order in Southeast Asia, which is a mixture of the terror-balance and noninterference

[78] United Nations, "Security Council," https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/content/purposes-and-principles-un-chapter-i-un-charter.

[79] In East Asian history, there have been several different tributary systems, including Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese.

[80] George H.W. Bush, "The Other 9/11: George H.W. Bush's 1990 New World Order Speech," *The Dallas Morning News*, 8 September 2017, https://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/commentary/2017/09/08/the-other-9-11-george-h-w-bush-s-1990-new-world-order-speech/.

[81] Yuen Foong Khong, "The American Tributary System Revisited," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2026), pp. 83–4.

[82] "Chapter 80," in *Laozi*, trans. Wei Guanglai (Taiyuan: Shanxi Ancient Books Press, 2003), p. 111.

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ideal types. In this order, there is no single state with regional superiority and the decision-makers of the member states in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations have not adopted policies to pursue superiority over other members. However, there have been some anemocratic decision-makers who turned to military methods for consolidation of personal power domestically, such as the case of the border clashes in 2025 as a result of the choices by the decision-makers of Thailand and Cambodia.[83] The variance of these mixed orders suggests significant room for further refined theoretical models.

Different norms of global orders

The term "interstate order" refers to a stable state of an interstate system and the stability is measured by the presence of peace or reduction of wars. Orders can be peaceful under differing norms. From the end of World War II to the present day, the global order has experienced three periods with differing norms: the Cold War, the post-Cold War, and the counter-globalization. This paper attributes the cause of norms changing between these three periods to the changing prevalence of nationalist, liberalist, and populist decision-makers globally.[84]

Nationalist norms of the cold war

The order of the Cold War resembles a terror-balance ideal type of interstate order, which is maintained by the threat of MAD between the American and the Soviet decision-makers. During the Cold War, the most influential ideology was nationalism and its popularization led to many national liberation movements (including wars for independence) in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. As a result, the number of the UN members increased from 51 to more than 150 during the Cold War. Although the ideological rivalry (capitalism vs communism) between the American and Soviet decision-makers led to the proxy wars during the Cold War, they all believed in nationalism and prioritized national interests over ideologies. For instance, Soviet decision-makers never placed the interests of proletariat across the globe above the interests of the Soviet Union. They even engaged in military intervention in other communist countries, such as Hungaria in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968.[85] American decision-makers also placed national interests above ideological concern. They claimed to advocate democracy while in actuality they allied with many dictators, such as Alfredo Stroessner of Paraguay, Manuel Noriega of Panama, Augusto Pinochet of Chile, Rafael Trujillo of Dominican Republic, Syngman Rhee of South Korea, Ngo Dinh Diem of the South Vietnam, Ferdinand Marcos Sr. of the Philippines, etc.

During the Cold War, the principle of national sovereignty and national independence were the major guidelines of interstate norms. In 1945, all national leaders of major powers agreed on the UN Charter which prohibits violation of its members' national sovereignty and supports national independence. Although sovereignty continued to be violated during the Cold War, decision-makers of states did not dare to claim that they opposed the principles of sovereignty. Those violating another's sovereignty must use the excuse of protecting their own sovereignty.

[83] Elisa De Angelis, "When Friendship Turns to Conflict: How Hun Sen and Paetongtarn Shinawatra's Feud Ignited a Border Crisis between Thailand and Cambodia," *War and Peace*, 11 July 2025, https://raiagroup.org/hun-sen-and-shinawatras-feud-ignited-border-crisis.

[84] Jordan Kyle and Limor Gultchin, "Populists in Power Around the World," *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*, 7 November 2018, https://institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/populists-power-around-world; Anthony J. Constantini, "Populists Are Gaining Power and Keeping It. What Comes Next?" *Politico*, 13 April 2025, https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2025/04/13/trump-populism-europe-us-00287198.

[85] Gu Xiaowen and Wang Wei, "Sugong Ershi Da Qianhou de Sulian Duiwai Guanxi" ("Soviet Foreign Relations after the 20th National Party Conference"), in Wang Shengzu, ed., *Guoji Guanxi Shi* (*History of International Relations*) (Beijing: World Affairs Press, 1995), pp. 302–12.

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This phenomenon demonstrates the importance of sovereignty as an interstate norm. During the Cold War, defense of sovereignty was the main justification for war,[86] such as Kim Il-sung of North Korea vs Syngman Rhee of South Korea in the Korea War, Hồ Chí Minh of North Vietnam vs Ngô Đình Diệm of South Vietnam in the Vietnam War.

Liberalist norms of the post-Cold War

The order formed by US leadership under the liberalism flag in the post-Cold War period most closely resembled a big-stick ideal type. Being the only superpower, the US decision-makers promoted American liberalist agenda becoming the most influential ideology during this period. Liberalism advocated for globalization, which pushed for marketization of the economy and political democratization. The decision-makers of most states accepted the value of free-market economy and opened their domestic market to foreign capital. The process of establishing a global market can be identified by the transition from the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) to World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995 after several rounds of negotiation between GATT member. Both Chinese and Indian national leaders were desperate to join the GATT during the transition period. The Indian government started economic reform and opened its market to foreign investment from 1991.[87] The Chinese government failed to join the GATT but finally obtained the membership to the WTO in 2001.[88] Liberalism advocated for the democratic governance, which led to an increasing number of democracies, typically represented by Eastern European states' transition from communist governments to democratic ones in the late 1980s.[89] The prevalence of democratic values also led to three waves of "color revolutions" in the following two decades, the "Central Asian wave," the "West Asia and North Africa wave," and the "Far East wave."[90]

During the post-Cold War era, the prevalence of liberalist values strengthened the norms of using human rights as justification for intervention when dealing with interstate problems. Through several rounds of debate between UN members, the international community reached a consensus to give special exception to human right on the matter of respecting national sovereignty. Responsibility to protect individual personal security (R2P) and humanitarian intervention became new international norms and were formally accepted by the UN in the late 1990s.[91] The R2P norm was the excuse G. W. Bush's administration used to wage war on Iraq in 2003. Katy Parry, a British scholar, said, "Although the 2003 Iraq invasion was not wholly framed as a 'humanitarian intervention', the rhetoric of bringing liberation, democratization and human rights to the Iraqi people was widely advanced by the coalition and supporters as a legitimating reason for war."[92]

[86] Arthur Larson, "International Order and National Sovereignty—They Can Co-Exist," *Catholic University Law Review*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (1971), https://scholarship.law.edu/lawreview/vol21/iss1/5.

[87] DouglasA.Irwin, "India's Trade Reforms 30 Years Later: Great Start but Stalling," *PIIE*, 22 July 2021, https://www.piie.com/blogs/trade-and-investment-policy-watch/indias-trade-reforms-30-years-later-great-start-stalling.

[88] World Trade Organization, "China and the WTO," https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/countries_e/china_e.htm.

[89] Dr Aline Sierp, *Democratic Change in Central and Eastern Europe 1989–90* (Brussel: European Parliament, 2015), chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.europarl.europa.eu/EPRS/EPRS_STU_538881_Democratic_change_EN.pdf.

[90] Matija Šerić, "Color Revolutions: The Most Sophisticated Means of Warfare—Analysis," *Eurasia Review*, 6 January 2024, https://www.eurasiareview.com/06012024-color-revolutions-the-most-sophisticated-means-of-warfare-analysis/.

[91] UN Office on Genocide Prevention & Responsibility to Protect, "Responsibility to Protect," 29 April 2023, https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/about-responsibility-to-protect.shtml.

[92] Katy Parry, "Images of Liberation? Visual Framing, Humanitarianism and British Press Photography during the 2003 Iraq Invasion," *Media, Culture & Society*, Vol. 33, No. 8 (2011), pp. 1185–201.

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Populist norms of counter-globalization

The coming global order is likely to be leaderless. With the current China–US bipolarity, none of the existing international institutions are able to provide leadership in the shaping of global order as long as the Chinese and American decision-makers are at odds. Regarding Beijing as a "near-peer" rival, the Trump administration adopted a policy of "economic rebalancing" with Beijing while deterring its concern of reunifying Taiwan.[93] At the moment, it is highly impossible that the Chinese and American decision-makers can provide joint global leadership, the so-called "G2." Meanwhile, none of them have the capability nor will, to provide a unilateral leadership for the world. Thus, the most likely outcome is that the coming global order will be a mixture of terror-balance and noninterference.

Currently, there is wide agreement that the liberal order has ended and its end was caused by the emergence of populist decision-makers on a global scale. David Lake said that "the LIO (liberal international order) is, if not dead, then certainly on its deathbed."[94] Michael Zürn argued that one of the major reasons for the end of the liberal order is that populist leaders rise to power within the liberal democracies.[95] Josh Bivens and Adam Hersh attributed the trend of counter-globalization to Trump's populist policies.[96] Reuters suggested that Trump's policy will increase the uncertainty of global order in 2026.[97] It is very possible that populism will continue in its upward momentum and liberalism will further decline in the coming decade.

The current dominating populist values are anti-liberalism (known as antiestablishment in the United States) and anti-globalization. Anti-liberalism sees liberal elites as selfish promoters of globalization to forward their own interests at the cost of masses' interests. While he was senate, Marco Rubio attributed all American problems to liberal elites, saying "a globalist elite hell-bent on underminingAmerica's best traditions and weakening a nation it views as an overly religious, backward, and imperialist regime unwilling to embrace a new world order."[98] He added, "After years of globalization, our towns have been hollowed out by the loss of factories and jobs. It is no longer possible for the vast majority of Americans to raise a family on a single earner's wages."[99] When discontent with liberal elites was transformed into anti-elitism, populist decision-makers turned to laymen to run their government. For instance, the main cabinet members of Trump 2.0 have limited experience in federal governance.[100] Trump's cabinet is not an exception, as the phenomenon of anti-elitism can be seen in the governments make-up of many current major powers.

The values of anti-liberalism and anti-globalization have fostered norms that prioritize economic and regime security. Chasing economic security becomes the given reason decision-makers use when adopting de-risking or decoupling policy. Trump's administration initiated a trade war against China in 2018, and crippled the WTO's dispute-resolution machinery in

[93] The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: White House, 2025), pp. 20, 23.

[94] David A. Lake, "The End of the Liberal International Order? Globalization, Deep Contestation, and the Future," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2026), p. 11.

[95] Michael Zürn, "Charting Global Futures: A Configurative Perspective on International Order," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2026), p. 44.

[96] Josh Bivens and Adam S. Hersh, "The U.S. Approach to Globalization Has Gone from Bad to Worse under Trump," *The Economic Policy Institute*, 29 May 2025, https://www.epi.org/publication/the-u-s-approach-to-globalization-has-gone-from-bad-to-worse-under-trump-how-to-construct-a-progressive-policy-agenda-instead/.

[97] "Trump Shook up Global Trade This Year; Some Uncertainty May Persist in 2026," *Reuters*, 22 December 2025, https://finance.yahoo.com/news/trump-shook-global-trade-uncertainty-060313193.html.

[98] Marco Rubia, *Decades of Decadence: How Our Spoiled Elits Below American's Inheritance of Liberty, Security and Prosperity* (New York: Broadside Books, 2023), p. 8.

[99] Ibid.

[100] Algernon Austin, "The Trump Administration Is Riddled with Unqualified Leaders," *CEPR*, 1 April 2025, https://cepr.net/publications/trump-administration-riddled-with-unqualified-leaders/.

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2020 through its refusal to appoint new members to the WTO's appellate body.[101] Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the EU Commission advocated for de-risking policy against non-EU states. In 2023, The European Commission and the High Representative published *The Joint Communication on a European Economic Security Strategy*, pushing for many approaches to minimize economic openness and restrict EU members from economic cooperation with non-EU countries.[102] Populism prioritizes regime security, which is perceived as securing personal power of national leaders, and some governments even prioritize regime security over national security overtly. Nowadays, in order to consolidate regime security, more and more decision-makers of states with different political systems have implemented strict policies of censorship, immigration, identity verification, security checks, and so on both domestically and internationally.

Conclusion

This paper advocates for the decision-maker paradigm because it is more effective at explaining changes in interstate relations than the structural paradigm. Interstate relations are constantly changing while static situations are temporary. The decision-maker paradigm is able to explain changes that occur while the structure remains the same as well as when the structure changes. It offers a strong explanatory power because decision-makers shape interstate relations and they can overcome or ignore structural constraints while doing so. In reality, structural factors are durable elements which do not change frequently; so/therefore, as constants, they cannot offer explanations for the changes that occur. Furthermore, the nature of interstate relations heavily weighs toward the personal rather than the national, with the relationship between decision-makers being a more decisive factor than the relations between states.

The decision-maker paradigm's utility goes beyond merely explaining the making of policies; it also explains the mechanism of structural changes at the system level, such as how changes in interstate order, norms, configuration, and strategic relations come to be. Actions taken by decision-makers are merely an intermediary between the decision-makers (independent variable) and the interstate structural changes (dependent variable). This paradigm provides a wider perspective than classical realism theories and political psychology theories, because it is meant to be an epistemological framework for developing new IR theories. The decision-maker paradigm can compensate for the shortcomings of the structural paradigm and improve the predictive function of IR theories. Based on the decision-maker paradigm, this paper predicts that the global order of the coming decade will be further disrupted by the prevalence of populist decision-makers worldwide, leading to more military and economic conflicts.

Taking into consideration that decision-makers are variable individuals, this paper categorizes decision-makers in broad strokes designed for universal application across cultures and time. Combining measures of capability and morality, the paradigm classifies decision-makers into four ideal types: humane authority, hegemony, egalitarian, and paper-tiger. Actions taken by decision-makers of a similar ideal type leads to an interstate order. From the four ideal types of decision-makers, arise four ideal types of interstate order: norms-adoption and big-stick, which are two orders with leadership, while noninterference and terror-balance are two leaderless orders.

Lastly, the decision-maker paradigm is not concerned with explaining how different types of decision-makers are formed. Mechanisms of how a given type of decision-maker comes into power are beyond the scope of the decision-maker paradigm. Barry Buzan said that "this

[101] Chad P. Bown and Soumaya Keynes, "Why Did Trump End the WTO's Appellate Body? Tariffs," *PIIE*, 4 March 2020, https://www.piie.com/blogs/trade-and-investment-policy-watch/trumps-trade-war-timeline-date-guide.

[102] European Commission, "An EU Approach to Enhance Economic Security," 20 June 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_23_3358.

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process [by which leaders come into power] makes it almost random whether the moral and managerial qualities of leaders are low or high."[103] The decision-maker paradigm may not be able to provide a solution to the question of how to successfully establish a leadership of humane authority but it can help to predict the historical retrogression caused by anemocratic decision-makers, especially those of major powers, who often disrupt interstate order.

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103 Barry Buzan, "We Will Need to Be Lucky: The Problem of Leadership in a Deep Pluralist World Order Facing a Climate Crisis," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2026), p. 26.

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