

## 19. The Decision-Making Approach to the Study of International Politics

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were affiliated with the Foreign Policy Analysis Project of Princeton University when they collaborated on the monograph from which this selection is drawn. Since then they have become associated, respectively, with the University of California, the U.S. Department of Commerce, and the University of Minnesota. From the moment of its publication this monograph was recognized as a major addition to the literature of the field. It was the first extended and systematic attempt to conceptualize the role of decision-making in the formulation of foreign policy and in the processes of international politics. As such, and like any pioneering document, it has had the effect of compelling students in the field to reexamine the concepts and procedures whereby they assess the deliberations and actions of policy-makers. Many have since found reasons to go beyond the decision-making approach as a basis for their own research, but few would deny that this document continues to be a major work and that the variables it encompasses must somehow be taken into account. The excerpt presented here sets forth the major premises of the decision-making approach and places it within the larger context of international politics and foreign policy. An application of this approach to empirical phenomena can be found in Selection 41. [Reprinted from Richard C. Snyder, H. W. Bruck, and Burton Sapin (eds.), *Foreign Policy Decision-Making: An Approach to the Study of International Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 1962), pp. 60-74, by permission of the authors and the publisher. Copyright 1962 by The Free Press, A Division of The Macmillan Company.]

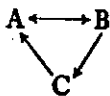
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We believe that those who study international politics are mainly concerned with the actions, reactions, and interactions among political entities called national states. Emphasis on action suggests *process analysis*, i.e., the passage of time plus continuous changes in relationships—including the conditions underlying change and its consequences. Since there is a multiplicity of actions, reactions and interactions, analysis must be concerned with a *number of processes*.

Action arises from the necessity to establish, to maintain, and to regulate satisfying, optional contacts between states and to exert some control over unwanted yet inescapable contacts. [Action is *planful*<sup>1</sup> in the sense that it represents: an attempt to achieve certain aims, and to prevent or minimize the achievement of the incompatible or menacing aims of other states.]

<sup>1</sup> Frank Knight, *Freedom and Reform* (1947), pp. 335-69.

The action-reaction-interaction formulation suggests that sequences of action and interaction are always closed or symmetrical. This may be diagrammed State A  $\longleftrightarrow$  State B which implies a reciprocal relationship. Such is clearly not always the case. Many sequences are asymmetrical, i.e., State A  $\longrightarrow$  State B  $\longrightarrow$  in which case State A acts, State B reacts but there is no immediate further action by A in response to B's action. With more than two states involved, of course, there are other possibilities—as suggested by



Given the fact that relationships may be symmetrical or asymmetrical and given the fact that action sequences though initiated at different times are nonetheless carried on simultaneously, there will be both the appearance and the possibility of *discontinuity* (i.e., discontinuous processes) within the total set of processes which link any one state with all others. [The process of state interaction is not, to repeat, always a sequence of action and *counter-action*, of attempt and frustration, of will opposing will. Nor should it be assumed that the process *necessarily* has an automatic, chess-game quality or that reactions to action are necessarily immediate or self-evident. Not all national purposes are mutually incompatible, that is, it is not necessary that one nation's purposes be accomplished at the expense of another set of national purposes.] One state may respond to the action of another without opposing that action *per se*; it may or may not be able to block that action effectively, it may or may not want to do so. The response may be in the form of inaction (calculated inaction we shall regard analytically as a form of action), or it may be in the form of action quite unrelated to the purposes of the state which acted first. Much diplomacy consists in probing the limits of tolerance for a proposed course of action and in discovering common purposes. [As action unfolds, purposes may change due to resistances or altered circumstances and hence, often, head-on conflicts are avoided or reduced in impact. For these reasons the processes of state interaction are much less orderly than—hopefully—the analysis of these processes.]

State action and therefore interaction obviously takes many forms—a declaration, a formal agree-

ment, regulation of relationships, discussion, a gift or loan, armed conflict, and so on. Reactions take the same forms only they are viewed as responses. [Since we are dealing with planful actions (rather than random behavior),<sup>2</sup> interaction is characterized by *patterns*, i.e., recognizable *repetitions* of action and reaction. Aims *persist*. Kinds of action become *typical*. Reactions become *uniform*. Relationships become *regularized*.] Further comment on the identification and characterization of patterns will be made below.

Thus far, there would probably be little disagreement except relatively minor ones on specific terminology. Now the question is: how is the political process (remembering always that this connotes multiple processes and *kinds* of processes) at the international level to be analyzed? Clearly there are *what*, *how* and *why* questions with respect to state interaction. In order to be true to our previously stated philosophy, we should recognize that there is more than one possible approach depending on the purposes of the observer and on the kinds of questions which interest him most.

### "The State as Actor in a Situation"

Figure 1 will serve as a partial indication of the fundamental approach adopted in this essay. . . .

*Commentary* [1. The first aspect of this diagrammatic presentation of an analytical scheme is the *assumption* that the most effective way to gain perspective on international politics and to find ways of grasping the complex determinants of state behavior is to pitch the analysis on the level of any state.] An understanding of *all* states is to be founded on an understanding of *any one* state through the use of a scheme which will permit the analytical construction of properties of action which will be shared in common by all specific states. That is, the model is a fictional state whose characteristics are such as to enable us to say certain things about all real states regardless of how different they may appear to be in some ways. Therefore if the scheme is moderately successful, we should be able to lay the foundation for analyzing the impact of cultural values on British foreign and on Soviet foreign policy even though the

<sup>2</sup> The distinction between social action and behavior is an important one analytically, though we shall continue to use state action and state behavior synonymously.

values are different in each case and produce quite different consequences. "State X," then, stands for all states or for any one state. We have rejected the assumption that two different analytical schemes are required simply because two states behave differently.

[It should be added immediately that theoretical progress in the study of international politics will require eventually a *typology* of states based on: basic political organization, range of decision-making systems, strengths and weaknesses of decision-making systems, and types of foreign policy strategies employed. This will facilitate comparison, of course, but it will also make it possible to take into

account certain significant differences among states while at the same time analyzing the behavior of all states in essentially the same way.

2. We are also assuming that the nation-state is going to be the significant unit of political action for many years to come.] Strategies of action and commitment of resources will continue to be decided at the national level. This assumption is made on grounds of analytical convenience and is not an expression of preference by the authors. Nor does it blind us to the development or existence of supra-national forces and organizations. The basic question is solely how the latter are to be treated. [We prefer to

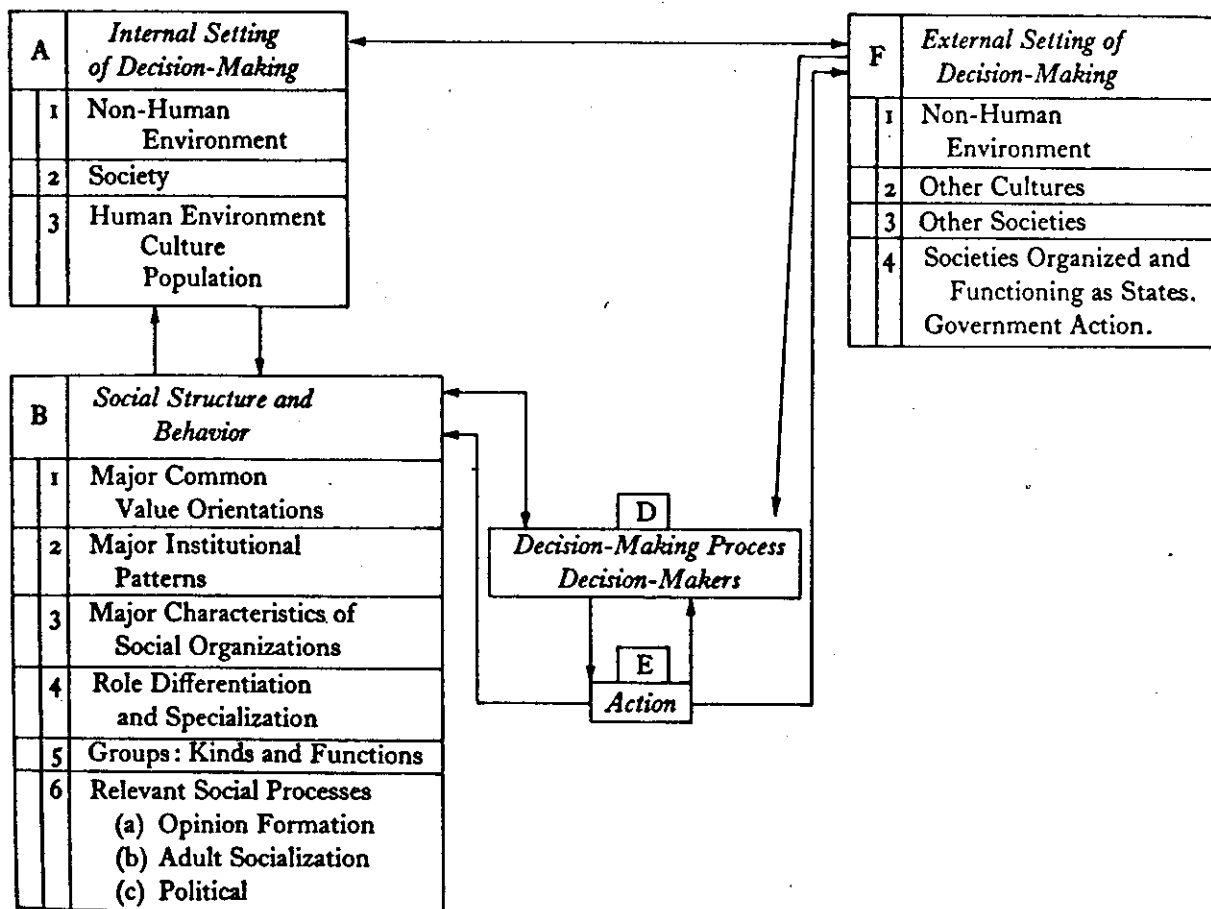


Figure 1. State "X" as Actor in a Situation\*

(Situation is comprised of a combination of selectively relevant factors in the external and internal setting as interpreted by the decision-makers.)

\* This diagram is designed only to be crudely suggestive. Detailed explanation must be deferred. The term non-human environment is construed to mean all physical factors (including those which result from human behavior) but not relationships between human beings or relationships between human beings and these physical factors. The latter relationships belong under society and culture.

view the United Nations as a special mode of interaction in which the identity and policy-making capacity of individual national states are preserved but subject to different conditioning factors. The collective action of the United Nations can hardly be explained without reference to actions in various capitals.

3. The phrase "state as actor in a situation" is designed primarily as a short hand device to alert us to certain perspectives while still adhering to the notion of the state as a collectivity.<sup>3</sup> Explicit mention must be made of our employment of action analysis and (both here and in the detailed treatment of decision-making) of *some of the vocabulary* of the now well-known Parsons-Shils scheme.<sup>4</sup> We emphasize vocabulary for two reasons. First, as new schemes of social analysis are developed (mostly outside of political science) there is a great temptation to apply such schemes quickly, one result being the use of new words without comprehension of the theoretical system of which they are a part. Second, we have rejected a general application of the Parsons-Shils approach as an organizing concept—for reasons which will emerge later. At this point we may simply note that our intellectual borrowings regarding fundamental questions of method owe much more to the works of Alfred Schuetz.<sup>5</sup>

[Basically, action exists (analytically) when the following components can be ascertained: actor (or actors), goals, means, and situation.] The situation is defined by the actor (or actors) in terms of the way the actor (or actors) relates himself to other actors, to possible goals, to possible means, and in terms of the way means and ends are formed into strategies of action subject to relevant factors in the situation. These ways of relating himself to the situation (and thus of defining it) will depend on the nature of the actor—or his orientations. Thus "state X" mentioned above may be regarded as a participant in an action

<sup>3</sup> Some social scientists argue that a collectivity cannot properly be regarded as an actor, as the term is used in the analysis of social action. However, see Talcott Parsons and Edward Shils, *Toward a General Theory of Action*, pp. 192–95.

<sup>4</sup> The vocabulary of action analysis has become fairly common, yet there are several kinds of action theories (for example, note the differences between Marion J. Levy, *The Structure of Society*, and Parsons and Shils, *op. cit.*).

<sup>5</sup> In particular, "Choosing Among Projects of Action," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 12:161–84 (December 1951) and "Common-Sense and Scientific Interpretation of Human Action," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 14: 1–37 (September 1953).

system comprising other actors; state X is the focus of the observer's attention. State X orients to action according to the manner in which the particular situation is viewed by certain officials and according to what they want. The actions of other actors, the actor's goals and means, and the other components of the situation are related meaningfully by the actor. His action flows from his definition of the situation.

4. We need to carry the actor-situation scheme one step further in an effort to rid ourselves of the troublesome abstraction "state." It is one of our basic methodological choices to define the state as its official decision-makers—those whose authoritative acts are, to all intents and purposes, the acts of the state. [State action is the action taken by those acting in the name of the state.] Hence, the state is its decision-makers. State X as actor is translated into its decision-makers as actors. [It is also one of our basic choices to take as our prime analytical objective the re-creation of the "world" of the decision-makers as they view it.] The way they define situations becomes another way of saying this is the way the state oriented to action and why. This is a quite different approach from trying to re-create the situation and interpretation of it *objectively*, i.e., by the observer's judgment rather than that of the actors themselves.

To focus on the individual actors who are the state's decision-makers and to reconstruct the situation as defined by the decision-makers requires of course that a central place be given to the analysis of the behavior of these officials. One major significance of the diagram is that it calls attention to the sources of state action and to the essentially subjective (i.e., from the standpoint of the decision-makers) nature of our perspective.

[5. Now let us try to clarify a little further. We have said that the key to the explanation of why the state behaves the way it does lies in the way its decision-makers as actors define their situation. *The definition of the situation*<sup>6</sup> is built around the projected action as well as the reasons for the action. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze the actors (the official decision-makers) in the following terms:

(a) their *discrimination* and *relating* of objects, conditions and other actors—various things are perceived or expected in a relational context;

<sup>6</sup> Compare this concept with Arthur Macmahon, *Administration in Foreign Affairs* (1953) Chap. I entitled "The Concert of Judgment."

(b) the existence, establishment or definition of *goals*—various things are wanted from the situation;

(c) attachment of *significance* to various courses of action suggested by the situation according to some criteria of estimation;

(d) application of "*standards of acceptability*" which (1) narrow the range of perceptions; (2) narrow the range of objects wanted; and (3) narrow the number of alternatives.

Three features of all orientations emerge: *perception, choice, and expectation.*<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps a translation of the vocabulary of action theory will be useful. We are saying that the actors' orientations to action are reconstructed when the following kinds of questions are answered: what did the decision-makers think was relevant in a particular situation? how did they determine this? how were the relevant factors related to each other—what connections did the decision-makers see between diverse elements in the situation? how did they establish the connections? what wants and needs were deemed involved in or affected by the situation? what were the sources of these wants and needs? how were they related to the situation? what specific or general goals were considered and selected? what courses of action were deemed fitting and effective? how were fitness and effectiveness decided?

6. We have defined international politics as processes of state interaction at the governmental level. However, there are non-governmental factors and relationships which must be taken into account by any system of analysis, and there are obviously non-governmental effects of state action. Domestic politics, the non-human environment, cross-cultural and social relationships are important in this connection. We have chosen to group such factors under the concept of *setting*. This is an analytic term which reminds us that the decision-makers act upon and respond to conditions and factors which exist outside themselves and the governmental organization of which they are a part. [Setting has two aspects: *external* and *internal*.] We have deliberately chosen *setting* instead of *environment* because the latter term is either too inclusive or has a technical meaning in other sciences. *Setting* is really a set of categories of *potentially relevant factors and conditions* which may affect the action of any state.

[*External setting* refers, in general, to such factors

and conditions beyond the territorial boundaries of the state—the actions and reactions of other states (their decision-makers) and the societies for which they act and the physical world.] Relevance of particular factors and conditions *in general* and *in particular situations* will depend on the attitudes, perceptions, judgments and purposes of State X's decision-makers, i.e., on how they react to various stimuli. [It should be noted that our conception of *setting* does not exclude certain so-called environmental limitations such as the state of technology, morbidity ratio and so on,] which *may* limit the achievement of objectives or which *may* otherwise become part of the conditions of action *irrespective of whether and how* the decision-makers perceive them.<sup>2</sup> However—and this is important—this does not in our scheme imply the substitution of an omniscient observer's judgment for that of the decision-maker. *Setting* is an analytical device to suggest certain enduring kinds of relevances and to limit the number of non-governmental factors with which the student of international politics must be concerned. [The external setting is constantly changing and will be composed of *what the decision-makers decide is important*.] This "deciding" can mean simply that certain lacks—such as minerals or guns—are imposed on them, i.e., must be *accepted*. A serious native revolt in South Africa in 1900 was not a feature of the external setting of U.S. decision-makers; it would be in 1954. Compare, too, the relatively minor impact of Soviet foreign activities on the U.S. decision-makers in the period 1927 to 1933 with the present impact.

[Usually the factors and conditions referred to by the term *internal setting* are loosely labeled "domestic politics," "public opinion" or "geographical position." A somewhat more adequate formulation might be: some clues to the way any state behaves toward the world must be sought in the way its society is organized and functions, in the character and behavior of its people and in its physical habitat. The list of categories under B (Social Organization) may be somewhat unfamiliar. There are two reasons for insisting that the analysis of the society for which State X acts be pushed to this fundamental level. First, the list invites attention to a much wider range of potentially relevant factors than the more familiar terms like morale, attitudes, national power, party

<sup>2</sup> We are indebted to Professor Harold Sprout for calling our attention to this point.

politics, and so on. For example, the problem of vulnerability to subversive attack is rarely discussed by political scientists in terms of the basic social structure of a particular nation, i.e., in terms of B<sub>3</sub>. Nor is recruitment of man-power often connected up with the way the roles of the sexes are differentiated in a society. Second, if one is interested in the fundamental "why" of state behavior, the search for reliable answers must go beyond the *derived* conditions and factors (morale, pressure groups, production, attitudes, and so on) which are normally the focus of attention.

[7. The diagram suggests another important point. Line BD is a two-way arrow connoting rightly an interaction between social organization and behavior on the one hand and decision-making on the other.] Among other things this arrow represents the impact of domestic social forces on the formulation and execution of foreign policy. BD implies that the influence of conditions and factors in the society is felt through the decision-making process. [But line EB is also important because it indicates that a nation experiences its own external actions. State action is designed primarily to alter factors and behavior or to otherwise affect conditions in the external setting, yet it may have equally serious consequences for the society itself.] We need only suggest the range of possibilities here. Extensive foreign relations may enhance the power of the central government relative to other regulatory institutions. Particular programs may contribute to the redistribution of resources, income, and social power. For example, the outpouring of billions in foreign aid by the United States since 1945 has contributed to the increased power and influence of scientists, military leaders, engineers and the managerial group. The people of a state experience foreign policy in other ways—they may feel satisfaction, alarm, guilt, exhilaration or doubt about it. There will be non-governmental *interpretations*—perhaps several major ones—shared by various members or groups of the society. Such interpretations may or may not be identical with the prevailing official interpretation. There will also be non-governmental *expectations* concerning state action which, again, may not correspond to official expectations. Discrepancies between non-governmental and governmental interpretations and expectations may have important ramifications. For one thing, public support and confidence may be

undermined if state action produces consequences which fundamentally violate public expectations.

[The point to be made here is that the diagrammatic expression of our scheme shows that the impact of domestic social factors (line BDE) must be viewed also as a part of a larger feedback process as indicated by line BDEBD.]

[8. Another significant set of relationships emerges from the diagram in line AB-F. The external and internal setting are related to each other.] Among others, two implications may be stressed here. First, because we have defined international politics as interaction process at the governmental level, it may appear that we are making the focus unduly narrow, thus ignoring a whole host of private, non-governmental interactions. Nothing could be further from the truth. Societies interact with each other in a wide range of ways through an intricate network of communications—trade, family ties, professional associations, shared values, cultural exchanges, travel, mass media and migration. While all of these patterns may be subject to governmental regulation (in some form), they *may* have very little to do with the origins and forms of state action. At any rate, the question of the political significance of inter-societal, intercultural non-governmental interactions requires an analytical scheme which will make possible some understanding of how such interactions condition official action. This in turn requires a much more systematic description of interactions than we now have, plus a way of accounting for their connection with state action.

[One can however study the interactions connoted by line AB-F for their own sake with only a slight interest in their political aspects. In this case, it seems proper to say that the focus is international relations rather than international politics.]

[Non-governmental international relations do not enter the analysis of state behavior *unless* it can be shown that the behavior of the decision-makers is in some manner determined by or directed toward such relations.] For example, assume a bitter, hostile campaign against a foreign government by powerful U.S. newspapers and assume the campaign is well publicized in the other nation. By itself this would constitute an asymmetrical interaction between two societies. It would not become a matter of state interaction unless or until the following happened: (a) an official protest to the U.S. State Department by the

foreign government; (b) retaliation against U.S. citizens in the foreign country; (c) disturbance of negotiations between the two governments on quite another issue; (d) arousal of public opinion in the foreign country to the point where the effectiveness of U.S. policies toward that country was seriously affected; (e) the pressure generated by the campaign in the U.S. caused the decision-makers to modify their actions and reactions vis-à-vis the other state; (f) the U.S. government officially repudiated the criticism and apologized to the other government. This same *kind* of argument would hold for all types of non-governmental relations except that there would be varying degrees of directness (i.e., change in intersocietal relations—change in state action) and indirectness (i.e., change in intersocietal relations—change in social organization and behavior—derived condition or factor—change in state action) and therefore different time-sequences.

[Second, while the most obvious consequences of state action are to be looked for in the reactions of other states along the lines DEF<sub>4</sub>D in the diagram, changes in the external setting can influence state action along the lines of DEF<sub>3</sub>A<sub>3</sub>BD, that is, indirectly through changes in non-governmental relations which ultimately are recognized and taken into account by the decision-makers.]

9. To get back to the center of the diagram, it should be noted that DE is a two-way arrow. The rest of this essay is concerned with the nature of decision-making, but it can be said here that in addition to the feedback relationships DEBD and DEF<sub>3</sub>A<sub>3</sub>, ED connotes a direct feedback from an awareness by the decision-makers of their own action and from assessments of the progress of action. [This is to say that state action has an impact on decision-making apart from subsequent reactions of other states and apart from effects mediated through the state's social organization and behavior.]

10. So far as this diagram is concerned, most attention in the field of international politics is paid to interactions DEF<sub>4</sub>DE. DE represents action(s); EF (particularly EF<sub>4</sub>) represents consequences for, or impact upon, the external setting; FD represents new conditions or stimuli—reactions or new actions (F<sub>4</sub>D). Therefore, DEFDE represents the action-reaction-interaction sequence.

Obviously these lines stand for a wide range of relationships and kinds of action. What should be

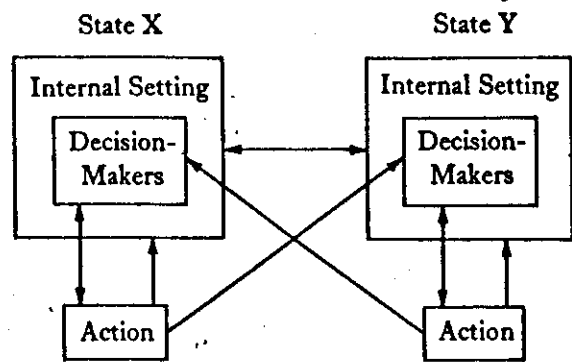


Figure 2

emphasized here is that interactions can be really understood fully only in terms of the decision-making responses of states to situations, problems, and the actions of other states. The combination of interaction and decision-making can be diagrammed as shown in Figure 2.

[Naturally if one thinks of all the separate actions and reactions, all the combinations involved in the governmental relationships between one state and all others, it seems unrealistic and somewhat absurd to let a few lines on a diagram represent so much. Indeed, all would be lost unless one could speak of *patterns* and *systems*. Patterns refer to *uniformities* and *persistence* of actions and sets of relationships. "Nationalism," "imperialism," "internationalism," "aggression," "isolationism," "peace," "war," "conflict," and "cooperation" are familiar ways of characterizing kinds of actions and reactions as well as patterned relationships among states. These terms are, of course, both descriptive and judgmental—they are shorthand expressions covering complicated phenomena and also may imply approval or disapproval, goodness or badness.]

[*System* in this context refers to the modes, rules and nature of reciprocal influence which structure the interaction between states. Five kinds of system—there are others—may be mentioned: *coalitions* (temporary and permanent); *supranational organization*; *bilateral*; *multilateral* (unorganized); and *ordination-subordination* (imperial relationships and satellites)] Once again, the way these interactions and relationships arise and the particular form or substance they take would seem to be explainable in terms

of the way the decision-makers in the participating political organisms "define their situation." As we have said elsewhere,<sup>8</sup> there seem to be only two ways of scientifically studying international politics: (1) the description and measurement of interaction; and (2) decision-making—the formulation and execution of policy. Interaction patterns can be studied by themselves without reference to decision-making except that the "why" of the patterns cannot be answered.

*Summary.* To conclude this brief commentary, it may be said that the diagram presented above entitled "the state as actor in a situation" is designed in the first instance to portray graphically the basic perspectives of our frame of reference: *any* state as a way of saying something about *all* states; the central position of the decision-making focus; and the integration of a wide range of factors which may explain state action, reaction and interaction.

The lines of the diagram carry *two* suggestive functions. First, they alert the observer to possible (known and hypothetical) relationships among empirical factors. [Thus the diagram simultaneously invites attention to three interrelated, intersecting

empirical processes—state interaction (DEFD) at the governmental level, inter-societal interaction (ABF) at the non-governmental level, and intra-societal interaction (BDEB) at both the governmental and non-governmental level. These processes arise, to put the matter another way, from decision-makers interacting with factors which constitute the dual setting, from state interaction as normally conceived, and from the factors which constitute internal and external settings acting upon each other.

Second, the diagram is intended to suggest possible analytic and theoretical relationships as well. [The boxes indicate ways of specifying the relevant factors in state behavior through the employment of certain concepts—decision-making, action, setting, situation, society, culture, and so on—which provide, if they are successfully developed, criteria of relevance and ways of handling the empirical phenomena and their inter-relationships. There are in existence a large number of tested and untested hypotheses, general and "middle range" theories, applicable within each of the categories comprising the diagram. The central concept of decision-making may provide a basis for linking a group of theories which hitherto have been applicable only to a segment of international politics or have not been susceptible of application at all. . . .

<sup>8</sup> Introduction to Karl Deutsch, *Political Community at the International Level*, Foreign Policy Analysis Series No. 2, 1953.