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Summary of “Ideas and Foreign Policy and Analytical Framework,” by Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane

In this chapter, the authors outline how ideas, defined as “beliefs held by individuals,” can be thought of as variables explaining political outcomes. The authors except the rationalist premise that, “. . . People behave in self-interested and broadly rational ways,” but insist that studying ideas can still contribute to an understanding of politics within the rationalist framework.

The authors begin by outlining three types of beliefs. The first is ideas as world views. The authors write, “At the most fundamental level, ideas define the universe of possibility.” Broadly speaking, ideas are functions which organize the world environment for individuals. Examples include scientific rationality, religious fundamentalism, and Stalinism.

The second group of ideas consists of “principled beliefs.” Here, ideas serve as criteria for “distinguishing right from wrong,” and therefore guide humans in moral action. Sometimes world views imply principled beliefs, as the authors note. Examples include beliefs in the wrongness of slavery, and the view that abortion is murder.

Thirdly, ideas exist as “causal beliefs,” that is, beliefs about cause-effect relationships. The authors give as an example the view that mass demonstration can bring about political revolution, or the a medical theory on how to cure smallpox.

The authors go on to delineate three pathways by which ideas can effect political outcomes. The first is that ideas act as “road maps.” World views and principled beliefs order the world in such a way that humans acquire preferences. At the same time, beliefs about cause-effect relationship allow humans to devise plans for attaining preferences. Putting these two mechanisms together, the authors arrive at the image of a “map”—that is, a portrayal of some goal along with a path or paths to reach it.

Secondly, ideas act as “focal points and glue.” This notion derives from the game theoretic insight that “players’ rational strategies often fail to result in a unique equilibrium outcome.” Since the multiplicity of possible equilibrium leads to uncertainty on the part of players as to what strategy to pursue they must rely on common beliefs to ensure coordination. Ideas, in other words, solve collective action problems.

Thirdly, the authors argue that ideas affect political outcomes via the process of “institutionalization.” Institutionalization is the process by which ideas become reified in concrete political structures. After the original ideas no longer exert suasive force on individuals, the still influence behavioral patterns through the institutions they have effectively created.

In terms of methodology, the authors argue that the effect of ideas can only be accounted for empirically after one has tried to explain outcomes in terms of underlying egoistic interests and power structures. After this null hypothesis has been rejected, one can use ideas as potential explanatory variables in a refined model (notice how this approach differs from Johnston, who shows that both ideas and realist assumptions could lead to the same predicted outcome, not necessarily negating the possibility that ideas are explanatory.)