

Philip G. Roeder, “Soviet Policies and Kremlin Politics,”
International Studies Quarterly (v. 28, 1984) 171-193

Soviet foreign policy reflects the characteristics of the political process that produces it. By characterizing the nature of the domestic political process along two dimensions—the *level of competition for power* and the *extent to which decision-making authority in a particular policy arena is dispersed*—one can characterize policies according to a combination of four attributes—*consistency, coherence, responsiveness, and risk-taking* (171,172).

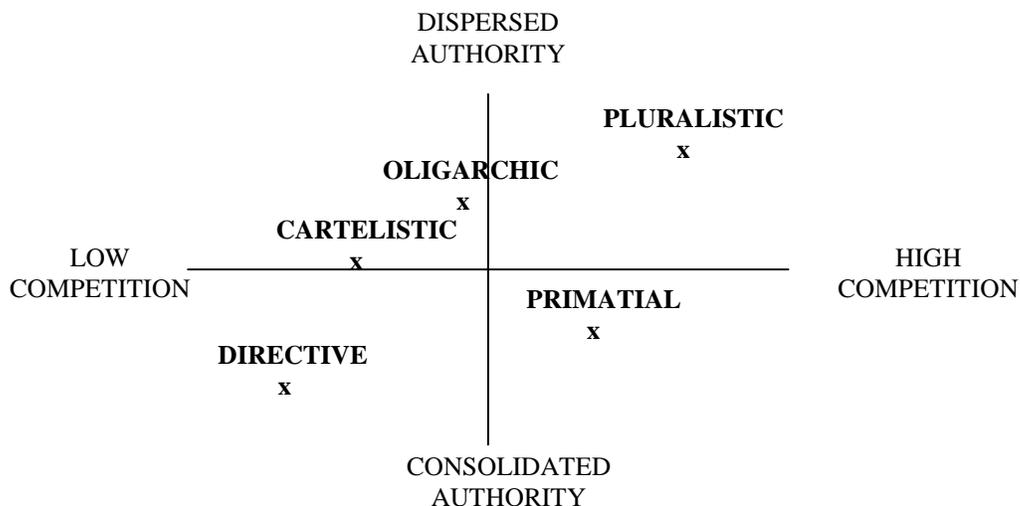
A basic model that links political structure to policy characteristics is as follows:



The nature of the distribution of power among the Soviet leadership determines the nature of the policy-making process, which in turn sets the attributes of Soviet foreign policy (171,172).

The power structure is characterized as by the *level of competition for power* within the ruling elite, and the *extent to which decision-making authority in a particular policy arena is dispersed* (172). The level of competition can be inferred from the rate of turnover of key personnel, but the degree of dispersion of authority can only be discerned from descriptive information (173-174).

The nature of the policy-making process (or decision-making regime) is determined by the power structure as depicted below (173):



The Soviet policy-making process changed forms between 1953 and 1977—moving from *pluralistic* in the succession crisis after Stalin’s death to *directive* as Khrushchev consolidated his power. The process changed again to *primatial* as opposition arose to Khrushchev’s policies, then to *oligarchic* in the aftermath of Khrushchev’s ouster, and finally to *cartelistic* as elites mutually checked each other’s power and settled into a situation in which a small group shared power, with each member having purview over specific aspects of policy (172-178).

Soviet policy can be characterized according to the following attributes (178-179):

- consistency— the extent to which actions in a specific policy area are reinforced by similar actions over time
- coherence— the extent to which policies in different areas reinforce each other
- responsiveness— the extent to which policy reacts to external initiatives
- risk-taking— the propensity to engage in initiatives to enhance conflict or cooperation

The nature of the political process (*competition for power* and *dispersion of decision-making authority*) determines the attributes of the policy produced by the process according to seven hypotheses, which are summarized in the table below (179-181):

	policy attributes			
power structure	consistency	coherence	responsiveness	risk-taking
competition	↓	↓	↓	↑
consolidation	—	↑	↑↓	↑

- consistency— In a competitive situation, leaders are tempted to use policy as a tool to promote their power or to block the aspirations of competitors.
- coherence— Competition tends to lead to contradictory or compromised policies because of “log-rolling.” Consolidation diminishes the extremes induced by “log-rolling.”
- responsiveness— Competition results in blocked initiatives or stalemates and diminishes the regime’s agility in responding appropriately to external events. Extreme consolidation can cause policy to become idiosyncratic (and thus unresponsive), whereas extreme dispersion may hamstring a regime’s ability to respond. Responsiveness is optimized when decision-making authority is neither too consolidated nor too dispersed.
- risk-taking— In a competitive situation, leaders are more likely to take risky actions to keep their opponents “politically off-balance.” If authority is not consolidated, policy tends to be incremental. Authority must be consolidated to promote bold policy innovations.

When the characteristics of the power structure are mapped to the policy-making process, the

predictions are summarized in the table below (181-182):

process	policy attributes			
	consistency	coherence	responsiveness	risk-taking
pluralistic	↓	↓	↓	↓
directive	↑	↑	↓	↓
primatial	↓	↓	↓	↑
oligarchic	↑	↓	↓	↓
cartelistic	↑	↑	↑	↓

The balance of the article attempts to test these predictions using statistical correlations drawn from a database of strategic interactions between the Soviet Union and the United States. When the descriptive statistics are placed in a relative ordering, the correlations are reasonably consistent with the authors' predictions (182-188).

The generalizable conclusions are as follows (189-190):

- Foreign policies reflect a regime's domestic politics as well as its foreign objectives
- The findings of case studies that analyze a state's foreign policy may not be generalizable because of the changing nature of the state's policy-making process
- U. S. policy makers must consider the domestic political context of foreign states' policy-making process