

Final

“While the assumption of rationality is clearly false, it is a useful fiction for developing explanations of behavior in international relations.” Is this correct. Discuss in light of theory and evidence.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines rationality as “the quality or state of being agreeable to reason: reasonableness.” How does this definition apply to international relations? Gideon Hanft, commenting on Kenneth Waltz’s opinions on nuclear weapons, writes, “Waltz’s beliefs are centered on the conception of states as unitary, rational actors. He argues that states seek survival above all else.”¹ Thus the word rationality, as used in the statement, is associated with survival.

On what basis then do nations interact with each other? Kenneth Waltz writes, “States are alike in the tasks they face, though not in their ability to perform them” (Waltz, 96). What does this statement mean? It means that sovereignty is not a function of power or influence; sovereignty is an absolute, something that cannot be measured or doled out or sliced up. Either a nation is sovereign or it is not. Partial sovereignty does not exist. Thus a large and mighty nation such as the Peoples Republic of China and a small and much less powerful nation like Denmark are equally sovereign, and relate with each other on that basis. It is further understood that as sovereign nations, each has the absolute right to act in its own best interest. Hence, the PRC can claim no right to dictate to Denmark what is in her best interest any more than Denmark can dictate the same to the PRC. This understanding forms the basis of relations between nations.

¹ Hanft, Gideon. “Rationality and Nuclear Weapons: Revisiting Kenneth Waltz.” Georgetown Journal of International Affairs. [Journal.georgetown.edu](http://journal.georgetown.edu). October 24, 2011 – online.

In the rationalist mindset, the world is a dangerous place. Waltz writes, “Among states, the state of nature is a state of war” (Waltz, 102). If Waltz is correct, then war between nations is not only natural but inevitable. The evidence seems to support Waltz’s assertion. At any given time a war is occurring somewhere on this planet. Does that mean that every country is involved? No, of course not. But it does put nations on notice that war is a means of settling disputes and can happen to them. War is like a hurricane. No matter how peaceful and placid the climate, sooner or later a hurricane will strike, wrecking everything. It is not a question of if, only of when. Knowing this, nations must take defensive measures to forestall that from happening, especially against those other nations that are perceived as posing a threat to their survival.

Under these conditions, interactions between nations breeds, in Waltz’s words, “hostility and fear” (Waltz, 174). This is because nations operate in an anarchic environment. There is no one available to police the international scene; each nation must defend itself and to rely on the goodwill of other nations is not a realistic option, especially when no nation can be trusted. It is a question of self-preservation. Waltz writes, “No human order is proof against violence” (Waltz, 103). That is true. There is no institutional guarantor who can permanently warrant peace or prevent war. James D. Fearon writes, “In international relations, by contrast, no agency exists that can credibly threaten reprisal for the use of force to settle disputes” (Fearon, 384). Each state is on its own. Indeed, when nations do combine to form alliances, they do so not promote peace, but to defend against some perceived external threat. Waltz writes, “The difference

between national and international politics lies not in the use of force but in the different modes of organizations for doing something about” (Waltz, 103). Hence, NATO was established not to promote friendly relations between states but as defensive shield to counter the perceived threat posed by the Soviet Union. But membership in multi-nation organizations also entails major costs in terms of dues, military expenditures, political commitments and other associated social and economic obligations and conditions. Each nation, as a sovereign entity, then must decide for itself whether membership is worth the cost.

In the rationalist model, the question of perception plays a major role in policy formulation. The degree to which a nation perceives another nation as a threat is a critical factor in formulating policy. If perceptions are inaccurate the results could be catastrophic. J. M. Goldgeier and P. E. Tetlock write, “Despite arguments to the contrary, the psychological literature on judgment and choice suggests that most decision makers are not natural Bayesians” (Goldgeier and Tetlock, 72). This statement is true. Decision makers, being human, are guided by emotion. For instance, the United States *perception* of the Soviet Union as a threat was a key, and perhaps *the* key, factor in shaping US foreign policy during the Cold War. If one accepts the rationalist position, that the world is anarchic, US policy decisions vis-à-vis the Soviet Union made sense. Such a mindset practically forced US planners to think in terms of relative gain. After all, if the US did not defend itself, who would? It was an either-them-or-us mentality.

It could be argued that the threat posed by the Soviet Union was overblown, was perhaps driven by domestic politics, or perhaps was an

emotional over-reaction to a regime that seemed strange and mysterious to Americans, but the salient point is that the US planners *understood* the Soviet Union to be a threat and acted accordingly. That the Soviet Union exploded an atomic bomb followed by a hydrogen bomb, which was then followed by the successful launching of a satellite into orbit, which in turn was followed by the launching of a spacecraft manned by a human, against all of which the US had *no defense and could mount no immediate creditable response* seemed to lend credence to US fears which injected an element of hysteria to US efforts to carefully weigh options. Fearon writes,

Actions that generate a real risk of war – for example troop mobilizations that engage a leadership’s reputation before international or domestic audiences – can easily satisfy this constraint since states with high resolve are less fearful of taking them. (Fearon, 397)

For US policy makers, the sheer audacity of the Soviet scientific achievements, and their obvious military implications, was further proof of Soviet high resolve, and confirmation that strategically the Soviet Union was gaining strength relative to the US.

In the rationalist model, a strong defense is essential to survival. Jonathan Mercer writes, “Deterrence depends on credibility” (Mercer, 13). After a series of Soviet strategic moves (e.g., Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe, the Berlin Blockade, the forceful suppression of the Hungarian revolution, the emergence of Castro in Cuba) which directly challenged the US strategic position in the world, Soviet decision makers made a monumental blunder by sending missiles to Cuba. If the intent of the Soviet planners was to further test US resolve, expecting

that the US would cave-in and accede to a blatant Soviet military incursion into the Western Hemisphere, then it proved a colossal miscalculation. Any relative gains the Soviet Union had accumulated up to that point were squandered away. Waltz writes, "In international affairs, force remains the final arbiter" (Waltz, 180). Brinkmanship not backed up by a genuine willingness to use force if necessary can have disastrous consequences. It reveals lack of resolve and weakness.

If policy makers are going to take such risks, the cost of failure versus potential benefits to be derived must be carefully weighed before making a final decision to act. Perceived in rationalist terms, the Cuban Missile Crisis was a decisive victory for the United States. It revealed glaring weaknesses in Soviet analytical capacity to predict US actions, limits to which the Soviet was willing to back up its words with force, and yielded a bonanza for the US in terms of relative gains.

That the Soviet Union and the United States succeeded in diffusing and deescalating the Cuban missile crisis without going to war is proof that the assumption of rationality, in the Waltzian sense of the word, as a effective basis for conducting international relations has its limitations. Adversaries can work together; war is not inevitable; cooperation, without impinging on sovereignty, is possible. Peaceful co-existence is more than a utopian goal; it is a practical reality. David A. Baldwin writes,

Although it would be misleading to characterize one side as concerned only with relative gains and the other as concerned only with absolute gains, the neoliberals have stressed the absolute gains from international cooperation, while the neorealists have emphasized relative gains. (Baldwin, 5)

International cooperation produces substantive benefits to all parties concerned, hence reducing, or even eliminating the need to go to war. Relative gains seem less attractive. Even in an anarchical world there are major incentives to foster multilateral cooperation based not on mutual distrust but on mutual respect, and to adopt that principle as a norm for international relations. The zero-sum model is not the only option.

Today there are dozens of international agencies, organizations, and alliances that foster and encourage international cooperation. Some, such as the United Nations, have been in existence for decades. Many, like G20, G7, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, bring nations together to jointly develop and implement economic policies designed to strengthen the world economy as a whole. Duncan Snidal writes, “The realist argument that relative gains seeking greatly diminishes possibilities for international cooperation is not generalizable” (Snidal, 201). This is true. The two are not incompatible; indeed, in today’s world that is becoming increasingly integrated and interconnected, to seek relative gain would come at simply too high a cost. For instance, would another major war between two world powers, such as what occurred between Japan and the United States during World War II, be possible today? Probably not because in today’s multi-polar world, the cost of such a conflict would far outweigh the potential gains to be derived by going to war.

In recent years the international scene has undergone a dramatic transformation. Today, with the number of major players in the field numbering at least twenty based on G20 membership, and many other states wanting to join the

club or form their own organizations, relative gain as a serious factor in policy formulation now seems to be almost irrelevant. Robert O. Keohane writes, “Even more significantly, the concept of relative gain becomes fundamentally ambiguous as the number of actors become greater than two” (Keohane, 276). States now have a stake in the game and want not only a slice of the world economic pie but to make the pie grow *bigger*; for any state to defect and embark on an all-out bilateral or quasi-bi-polar competition today is so unnecessary and reckless, and would entail so many costs and invite so many penalties, as to make such a course of action prohibitive (e.g., Russia 2014). The re-emergence of a bi-polar configured world with countries choosing sides seems remote.

Yet, security considerations still drives foreign policy. States do go to war. Grieco writes, “States in Powell’s model are concerned about relative gains because of fears for their security” (Grieco, 313). But relative gains provide no assurance that security will be achieved. Therefore states have a vested interested in pursuing policies that foster international stability and protect of the playing field. Oneal, Russert and Berbaum write, “Copeland suggests that states’ expectations regarding their future economic relations are crucial in shaping the prospects for peace” (Oneal et al, 384). Any nation today that plans to compete economically on the international scene has to be committed to cooperation as a matter of policy. This means suppressing any aggressive designs; to do otherwise would invite ostracism and other penalties that such rejection would entail. Under the rationalist model, such proscriptions might lead to war, as lines are drawn and polarization occurs. But in today’s world, such a scenario would

come at a tremendous economic cost, making such an option unattractive and unnecessary.

In 1922 former Secretary of State Elihu Root said: “When foreign affairs were ruled by autocracies or oligarchies the danger of war was sinister purpose. When foreign affairs are ruled by democracies the danger will be in mistaken beliefs.” Was Root correct? Be sure to consider his claims about both democracies and autocracies.

To better understand what Root meant, the words “sinister” and “beliefs,” need to be defined.² According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary “sinister” means “having an evil appearance: looking likely to cause something bad, harmful, or dangerous to happen;” “belief” means: “a feeling of being sure that someone or something exists or that something is true; a feeling that something is good, right, or valuable; a feeling of trust in the worth or ability of someone.” Jonathan Mercer defines a belief as “a proposition or collection of propositions that one thinks is probably true. A belief presupposes uncertainty. In contrast, knowledge is risk free, impersonal, and constant” (Mercer, 3). Thus, based upon these definitions as applied to the aforementioned statement, Root is asserting that when autocracies or oligarchies are considering going to war, they do so for evil reasons while democracies may risk war for erroneous reasons. Is Root correct?

First of all, decision making is a complex process. Rose McDermott writes,

As has been shown in a wide variety of decision-making domains, descriptive models of human choice require far greater complexity than more conventional economic models, which excel in prediction but often fall short in providing an accurate explanatory model of human decision-making. (McDermott, 305)

Thus, if McDermott is correct, there is no pat or glib explanation for why a policy maker would want to go to war, or would even consider going to war as an

² For literary purposes, personal pronouns are in the masculine only. However, it should be understood that all comments in the text apply to females too.

option. It would depend on several factors: the state's preferences, gains to be accrued, short and long term policy goals, the policy maker's emotional state of mind, the preferences of domestic coalitions, treaty obligations, institutional pressures, and the legitimacy of the domestic political process itself, all of which play critical roles in formulating policy.

The question is: where does sinister intent fit into the equation? Policy makers make mistakes, that is a given, but if the policy maker is an autocrat, does that automatically mean that his motives are somehow suspect? Bruce Bueno de Mesquita writes that "war is fundamentally a political act, domestically and internationally" (de Mesquita, 364). There is, as de Mesquita points out, a relationship between foreign policy and domestic politics. Hence, one cannot be analyzed without taking the other into account. This further complicates efforts to ascertain motive since other groups may be involved in the decision making process.

In an autocracy or oligarchy, policy decisions are made by, in de Mesquita's words, "a small coalition of essential backers" while in a democracy, political leaders, again using de Mesquita's words, "depend on support from a large coalition" (de Mesquita, 363). The key difference between the two forms of polity as it relates to policy formulation is that in the autocratic model, in which the leader is supported by "a small winning coalition," the pursuit of foreign policy objectives is driven for "private benefits for supporters" while in the democratic system, foreign policy formulation is pursued as "a public good enjoyed by all" (de Mesquita, 364, 366). Thus in the autocratic model the policy

maker is beholden to a small coalition while in a democracy the policy maker ostensibly acts in the interests of a much larger coalition that has a direct stake in the outcome.

It is possible that an autocrat, for whatever reason, can make policy decisions that are deceitful, that is, based on lies. But the same can be said for the unscrupulous political demagogue in a democracy who will stop at nothing to gain a vote. When the political system is rife with secret deals, questionable expenditures of money, and lack of transparency at all levels of the process, abuses will occur and the system will be corrupted. That is bound to have a deleterious effect on foreign policy making decisions, no matter who is in office. What is at stake is power, and through power, the control of patronage, resources, and wealth, all of which provide major incentives to manipulate and deceive.

People can be misled; their trust violated. In a democracy policy makers are expected to act in the best interest of all the people, not just for the private benefit of a few well-placed interest groups. To do otherwise undermines the democratic process and makes the entire system a sham. When policy makers are open to influence the outcome of elections become moot. Democratic checks and balances may impose legal limitations on a policy maker's authority to act, but if a policy maker is vulnerable to influence, those legal limitations will not matter. Robert D. Putnam writes, "At the national level, domestic groups pursue their interests by pressuring the government to adopt favorable policies, and politicians seek power by constructing coalitions among those groups" (Putnam, 434).

The levers of power are operated by those who can apply pressure. Barbara Farnham writes, “The political decision-maker’s dominant concern with acceptability also means that the decision-making behavior will be driven by the search for transcendent solutions” (Farnham, 100). As long as the system is honest, decision makers will act altruistically, but if the system is brokered, then the only transcendental solutions that will be sought are those that satisfy the special interests who are driving the decision-making process.

Under these circumstances, a decision maker bought and owned by special interests could make questionable foreign policy decisions, e.g., US decisions to invade Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. In both cases cited, the president committed US military forces without first obtaining a declaration of war from the Congress as mandated by the US Constitution, thus usurping the authority of the legislature and transforming himself into a de facto autocrat. The question is not whether this arrogation of power was based on mistaken beliefs. Rather, the question is two-fold: why would the president want to act unilaterally without securing formal political backing from the legislature and who would benefit from such a risky course of action?

Political lobbies exist. They are individuals and organizations representing special interest groups who peddle political support in exchange for favors. Lobbyists are accountable to no one. They use influence to pressure decision makers into making decisions that special interests favor. These transactions pervert the democratic process and put the state at risk. In 1961 President Dwight D. Eisenhower said:

In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.³

In 2014 Texas Senator Ted Cruz said:

The corrupt culture of Washington listens to the lobbyists and not the people.⁴

If Eisenhower and Cruz are correct (and there is no reason to question the accuracy of their comments), then the United States is a plutocracy controlled by special interest groups who are pushing US policy makers to pursue aggressive policies for reasons that are contrary to the national interest. Policy makers are reduced to puppets who act in accordance with those who are pulling the strings. If the puppet has the temerity to balk, his strings will be cut and he will collapse, become superfluous, and be replaced.

But it is a rare political puppet that wants to defy his managers. Political puppets crave to be seen and heard; they love the attention and the trappings, if not the substance of power. They are entirely amoral and categorically receptive to influence. In this respect, if one agrees with Root's characterization of autocracy as sinister, then democracy is no different than autocracy, and in fact may be far more venal and therefore much more depraved and dangerous.

Sometimes the decision making process may become frozen when the competition between rival coalitions fails to produce consensus. Lack of consensus produces political gridlock. To break the gridlock, coalitions may have an incentive to temporarily forfeit power to the decision maker so he can act

³ Eisenhower, Dwight D. Farewell Address, January 17, 1961.

⁴ Cruz, Ted. Speech, United States Senate, 113th Congress, December 12, 2014.

without outside influence, that is, without restraint. Abuses of power may result but such a cost will be offset by things getting done. Of course, if the decision maker acts irresponsibly he could destroy the state, but that is a risk worth taking if coalitions are confident that they can re-impose control. Once the state begins moving forward again, coalitions could then re-assert their authority and reign in the decision maker, who, by acting in isolation, hypothetically cannot possibly survive for long. It is not a question of what is right but what is expedient.

No coalition ever gladly concedes power, but neither does it want to squander power in intramural squabbles with other coalitions that yield no tangible results. To pursue such a fruitless course renders a coalition redundant. If a coalition cannot effectively advocate for its constituency, its members will leave and seek other venues through which to exercise influence, and new coalitions will emerge, along with new decision makers.

Coalition formation is a dynamic process. As a society evolves old interest groups disappear and new ones emerge. Decision makers must be cognizant of these changes; to be oblivious will render them irrelevant and vulnerable to replacement. Once again, it is not a question of sinister intent or mistaken beliefs, but expediency. If a rift develops between a coalition and the decision maker, the rift must be closed. This may come with serious costs for those who lose in the ensuing struggle but may well be worth the risk if it means acquiring power.

It is reasonable for Root to be suspicious of autocracy; who can trust a king to do what is morally right? Unlike a democracy, a king presumably acts only for himself and not for the people. Hence democracy must be presumed to

be a morally superior form of government. The motives of the people as a whole cannot be impugned; their intentions are, at least idealistically, pure. What Root fails to acknowledge is the corrupt nature of the system that transforms the political process into a marketplace and decision makers into stooges for special interests. The only mistaken beliefs are those having to do with calculating how much to pay and how much to take.

A king can be corrupted too, but with one difference: even a corrupt king can still claim political legitimacy (even if such a claim is based on a fantasy, such as Divine Right) while a bought-off decision maker can claim only that he is a fraud. Thus a king can pursue a foreign policy for all the wrong reasons and still garner political cover while the dishonest decision maker can make no such claim for support because his legitimacy has long since been compromised, thus leaving him vulnerable to immediate removal.

In a corrupt democracy, where political legitimacy is a transferable commodity, anyone can be installed as a decision maker, and just as easily removed. Yet exceptions can occur, especially if the coalition misjudges the decision maker's character. In that case, the decision maker may use his position to terrorize his backers into submission and extract concessions to make his position unassailable, thus becoming an autocrat, e.g., Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin. Gaining supreme power carries the risk of having to bear all the blame if policy decisions go awry, but what decision maker ever expects that he is going to fail? Intent can only be surmised. What is relevant is that he now has power, to do with it whatever he wants. He will be judged by his actions. Who does the judging and why is another matter.

