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How States Think: The Rationality of Foreign Policy

Mearsheimer, John J., and Sebastian Rosato
(Yale University Press, 2023, 304)

Reviewed by: Tarique Ahmed Abro¹

Much of modern International Relations theoretical frameworks are based on the notion that “states are rational actors,” meaning their leaders act in a purposive way when making foreign policy. *How States Think: The Rationality of Foreign Policy*, presents a much-needed scholarly viewpoint, by two distinguished American political scientists, John J. Mearsheimer and Rosato Sebastian, about the backend thought process behind the rational foreign policy formulation.

The book comprises nine chapters: (i) The Rational Actor Assumption; (ii) Strategic Rationality and Uncertainty; (iii) Defining Strategic Rationality; (iv) Contending Definitions; (v) Rationality and Grand Strategy; (vi) Rationality and Crisis Management; (vii) Nonrational State Behavior; (viii) Goal Rationality; and (ix) Rationality in International Politics.

According to the authors, a state is rational if the views of its key decision-makers are aggregated through a deliberative process and the final policy is based on a credible theory. Conversely, a state is nonrational if it does not base its strategy on a credible theory, does not deliberate, or both (p. 2).

In Chapter One, the authors posit that states operate in a system where there is no higher authority to protect them and where other states can and may want to do them grave harm. Consequently, they have a strong interest in finding the best strategies to address the problems they confront. This leads individual policymakers to employ credible theories to make sense of the world and decide what to do, as well as to deliberate among themselves to settle on a strategy for moving forward (p. 13). The next three chapters discuss the theoretical aspect of the concept of rationality.

Chapter Two discusses the meaning of strategic rationality as “an intended means of achieving a foreign policy objective” at a general level, focusing on the fact that international politics is an informational arena in

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which statesmen usually take stock of “real-time” information before making strategic decisions. According to the authors, a rational aggregation process has two dimensions. First, there is a procedure for assuring systematic evaluation of the possible strategies. Second, the rational solution is to ensure methodical consideration of all the options (p. 22). In Chapter Three, authors lay out their definition of strategic rationality, arguing that what distinguishes rational from nonrational policymakers is whether or not they base their policy choices on credible theories (p. 38). Chapter Four examines other arguments about rationality in international politics. Rational choice scholars define rationality as expected utility maximization (p. 70). Whereas, political psychologists define nonrationality as deviation from expected utility maximization, which they call bias (p. 71).

In Chapter Five, the authors describe five cases of grand strategic decision-making to support their argument that states act rationally: (i) Germany decides how to deal with the Triple Entente before World War I; (ii) Japan decides how to deal with the Soviet Union before World War II; (iii) France decides how to meet the Nazi threat before World War II; (iv) The United States decides to expand NATO after the Cold War; and (v) The United States decides to pursue liberal hegemony after the Cold War (p. 103). In Chapter Six, the authors discuss five cases of crisis decision-making to support their argument: (i) Germany’s decision to start World War I in 1914; (ii) Japan’s decision to attack the United States at Pearl Harbor in 1941; (iii) Adolf Hitler’s decision to invade the Soviet Union in 1941; (iv) the United States’ decision to settle the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962; and (v) Moscow’s decision to invade Czechoslovakia in 1968 (p. 140).

However, this is not to say that states have always been rational. In Chapter Seven, authors describe four examples of strategic nonrationality: (i) Imperial Germany’s decision to build a powerful navy designed to challenge Britain at the turn of the twentieth century; (ii) Britain’s choice to not build an army to fight on the European continent in the late 1930s; (iii) America’s decision to launch the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961; and (iv) America’s decision to invade Iraq in 2003 (p. 180).

In Chapter Eight, the authors switch their focus away from strategic rationality and discuss the significance of goal rationality. The authors believe that, contrary to the claims of some scholars, there is scant evidence of states subordinating their self-preservation to other objectives, ignoring the survival imperative, or recklessly putting their survival at risk (p. 211). Lastly, in

Chapter Nine, the authors briefly summarize all the arguments presented in the book and explore the implications of their arguments for the theory and practice of international politics (p. 223).

In Conclusion, the book is a theoretical debate and authors present historical examples to prove their argument that all states are largely rational actors. By comprehensively examining the concept of decision making at the state level, the authors try to explain the rationale the world leaders use while formulating foreign policy, both in times of peace and crises. The book can be a good addition to the academic literature and for the practitioners of international relations, academics and students.



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