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John J. Mearsheimer & Sebastian Rosato, *How States Think: The Rationality of Foreign Policy*, Yale University Press: New Haven & London 2023 280pp £25

Most states act rationally most of the time, argue John Mearsheimer and Sebastian Rosato in this pithy and elegant book. It is a commonsense proposition that many observers of international affairs would readily accept, not least historians, whose researches provide the case-studies that illustrate the rationality of state behaviour

Most historians of international relations are soft-core realists who see state behaviour as primarily driven by power and the pursuit of national interests but also recognise the potentially important role of ideas, identities, feelings, personalities and domestic politics. All these elements are captured and presented in narratives revealing of the policy processes and decision-making that create the field of action that is international politics.

Mearsheimer and Rosato are more hard-core realists. According to them, rational state action results from 'theory-driven' deliberative processes that culminate in decisions based on credible theories. Policies and actions that do not meet these criteria are deemed 'non-rational'. Happily, most states' foreign policies are characterised by rationality. The non-rational is the exception not the norm in international politics.

By 'theory' the two authors mean assumptions about international politics that are not necessarily true but are plausible, realistic, logical and evidence-based. As important to their concept of rational decision-making is that it is based on relatively open-ended deliberative processes in which there is a contest of theories that is then resolved by a coherent, final decision.

The chosen case-studies – most of which concern either the two World Wars or the Cold War - are quite convincing but in some respects anomalous. The 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, for example, is indeed a good case-study of deliberative decision-making in

which Moscow's policy-makers collectively weighed the pros and cons of military action to terminate Alexander Dubcek's 'Prague Spring'. But missing from Mearsheimer and Rosato's account is the important role of the affective factor – the gradual breakdown of the relations of comradely love and trust between Dubcek and Soviet leader, Leonid Brezhnev.

Brezhnev was an inclusive, consultative leader who presided over meaningful Politburo discussions preceding decision and action, not just in relation to Czechoslovakia but other major events such as the military intervention in Afghanistan in 1979. That was less true of his immediate predecessor, Khrushchev, who tended to be a maverick decision-maker, and not true at all of Stalin at the height of his dictatorial rule. Under Stalin, the deliberative process was informed by external views and briefings but it took place mainly in his own head. He was a one-man rational decision-maker. Is it credible to characterise Stalin's foreign policy as less rational than Brezhnev's simply because it doesn't match the criteria of procedural rationality?

In their case-study of Hitler's decision to invade Russia, Mearsheimer and Rosato insist that strategy not ideology prompted Operation Barbarossa. Maybe so, but it was Hitler's worldview that pointed to war as the means to liquidate the Soviet strategic threat and his ideology shaped the exterminatory character of the invasion. It was Nazi ideology that begat the mass murder of Soviet Jews and the ambition to enslave the *Untermenschen* Slavs. Sometimes the 'non-rational' is the more important historical phenomenon.

The same point applies to the authors' treatment of Putin's decision to invade Ukraine. Arguably, the invasion was, as they say, a rational response to NATO's military build-up of Ukraine, though it is not clear there was much of a deliberative process preceding Putin's final decision for war. But the form and goals of the so-called Special Military Operation have surely been shaped not only by strategic calculations but by his professed solidarity with millions of pro-Russia Ukrainians - a factor that may feature strongly in any peace negotiations.

Somewhat surprisingly, the book's main case-study of non-rational decision-making is the US decision to invade Iraq in 2003. While the goals of the invasion were perfectly rational –

regime-change in order to spread democracy and curtail nuclear proliferation – there was no deliberative process of decision-making because the proponents of military action closed down the discussion. The knock-on effect of those office-politics manoeuvres was the absence of planning for the occupation of Iraq – a failure that had many negative consequences and results. Yet those Neocon tactics are quite normal in contested decision-making processes and quite rational given their strong belief in the righteousness of their cause. The same strength of feeling is evident in the closing down of western debates about the Russo-Ukrainian war.

As Mearsheimer and Rosato point out, there is a lot at stake in presuming the predominance of rationality in international politics. This is - or should be – the guiding assumption of decision-makers striving to understand and predict the behaviour of their counterparts in other states. It is rationality that enables practitioners to devise effective foreign policies and control outcomes.

However, this book is only partly aimed at practitioners. It is inscribed to 'fellow international relations theorists' and many of its pages are devoted to contesting alternative views that stress the human and situational limits of rational foreign policy decision-making. Like the rest of the book, these intra-IR theory debates are handled clearly and incisively, but more important, from the historian's point of view, than the extent of rationality is the intelligibility of action and decision-making – and our ability to comprehend it even when we consider it non-rational, irrational or not rational at all.